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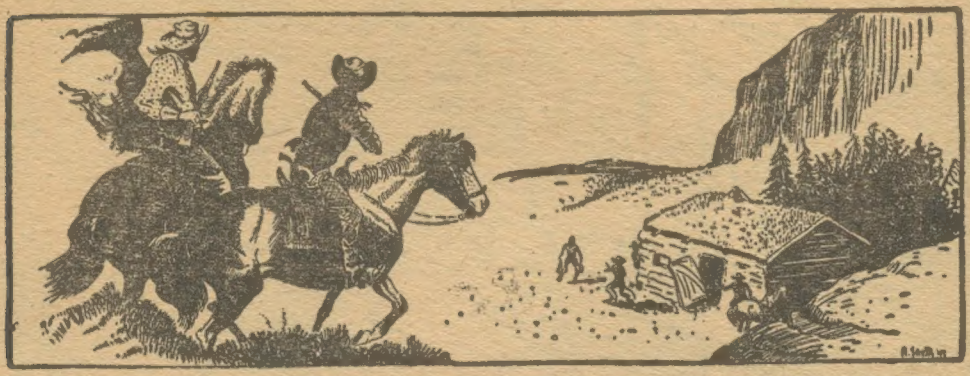

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Robert W. Lowndes, Editor

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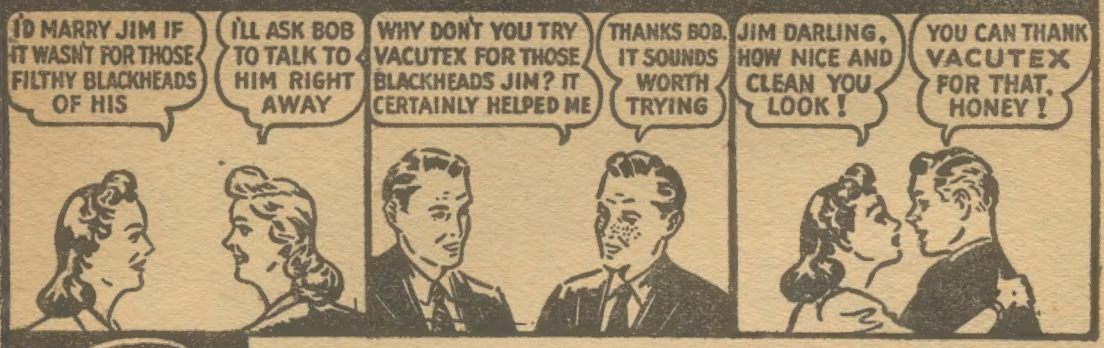
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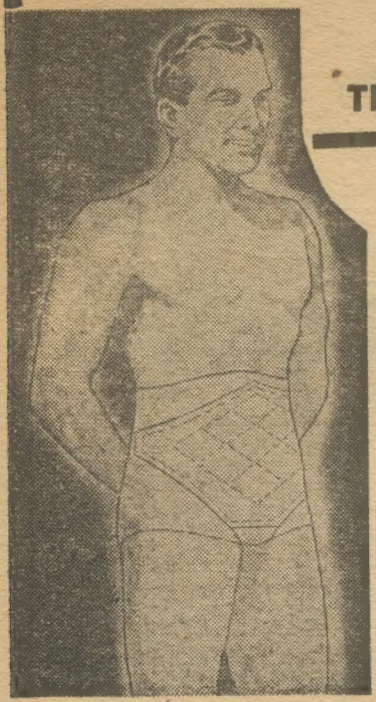

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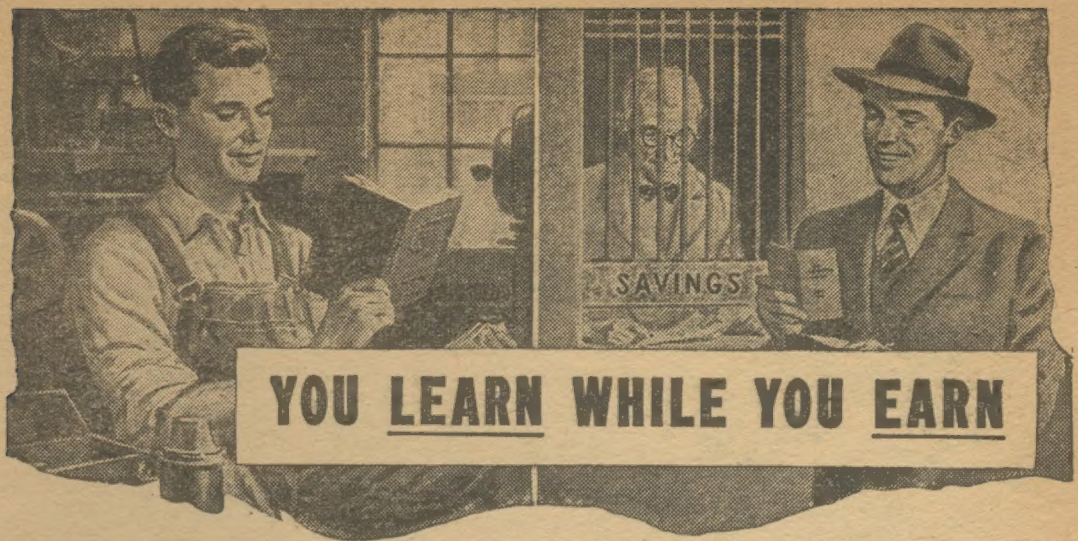

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COTTONWOOD PARDS

By Lee Floren

The land around Cottonwood was poor range, except the sections Len Myers owned. Yet Myers was out to grab it all from the small ranchers. It didn't make sense, because there were neither precious metals nor oil on this land. But Buck McKee and Tortilla Joe were with the ranchers in their last-ditch stand.

Magazine Publication
"Buck McKee and
Joe" Novel

"Drop those guns," commanded Tortilla Joe.

CHAPTER I

Holdup!

FOR THREE consecutive years the drouth had hit the Wolf Ridge country, burning the grass to its roots and drying up the water holes. Tall Buck McKee squinted into the afternoon sun and silently cursed the heat. He turned his gaze on his Mexican partner, fat Tortilla Joe, who was puffing the last melancholy strains of *Bury Me Not on the Lone Prairie* into his battered mouthharp.

"Damn this heat," said Buck.

Tortilla Joe mopped his dark forehead with his bandana. "Thees co'ntry she ees hot," he mumbled. "The grass he ees all burned up. Poor co'ntry for cattle." He stuffed his bandana into his shirt pocket. "Soon we reach Mike Swanson's ranch, no? But first we ride through Cottonwood town? We get a dreenk, maybe?"

"Maybe," said Buck lazily.

"I play somethin' else," said Tortilla Joe. *"Missouri Reever Hoedown. . . ."*

Tortilla Joe swung into action, his heavy cheeks bulging as he played. He was a short, squat Mexican wearing dirty, bell-bottom pants and a gaudy serape. Then, suddenly, he stopped, and stared inquiringly at Buck.

"What was that?" he asked.

"Somebody shootin'," said Buck. "Over the ridge, Tortilla. Maybe we oughta go investigate?"

Tortilla Joe grinned widely, crammed his mouth-harp into his pocket, and pulled his heavy single-action Colt from its holster.

"Lead the way, Buck."

They spurred their leg-weary

broncs up the slope, two hard-riding men with drawn pistols, Buck McKee's sorrel taking the lead. Once on the summit, they drew rein and, hidden by the scrubpine, they studied the drama being enacted on the road below them.

Two masked bandits were robbing a wagon loaded with dried cowhides. The driver had wrapped the reins of the bay team around the brake-handle. He was standing in the wagon, his left hand raised above his head. He had evidently been shot in the right shoulder: his right hand hung limply at his side.

Buck McKee knew instantly what had happened. The bandits had waited in the brush and caught the driver in a surprise attack. One stood on the ground, his .45 covering the driver.

The other was up in the wagon. He was pulling a small sack out from under the cowhides. Buck McKee's eyes puckered.

"Unless I'm badly mistaken, Tortilla, that driver is Mike Swanson!"

"Mike Swanson!" repeated Tortilla. His eyes widened. "Mike Swanson is your ol' friend, no—the fella we come to help?"

"That's him," grunted Buck.

Tortilla Joe smiled. "We get in a fight, no? *Bueno!*"

WITH Buck in the lead, the pair thundered down the hill, heading for the holdup. They followed no trail; they crashed through buck-brush and scrubpine. Once Buck's jaded bronc stumbled over a root. Buck jerked the beast upright, his gun in his right hand.

The bandits saw them, then. The one in the wagon hurriedly threw the sack to the man on the ground, who caught it and ran for his horse, tied in the brush. He swung into his saddle and rode away at a fast lope, the sack in one hand, his gun in the other. He rode twisted in his saddle, his .45 stabbing flame back at Tortilla Joe and Buck.

But he was riding too fast for accurate shooting or for Colt work, and his bullets fell short. He headed at a hard lope for the brushy, scrubpine region on the slope above him.

The other did not have time to jump to the ground and make a run for his bronc. His only hope of escape was to make his getaway with the wagon.

He gave Mike Swanson a hard shove. Mike toppled out of the wagon and landed on the ground. The bandit jerked the reins loose from the brake-handle and rolled away in a cloud of hanging dust.

He held the reins in one hand, his gun in his other. He braced himself, legs wide, threw lead back at Buck and Tortilla Joe.

Buck heard the angry whine of a bullet overhead. He reined in his rearing bronc, shot three times. He heard the thin scream of the man rise out of the turmoil.

The man dropped the reins and the runaway team plunged on, ears laid back. The wagon lurched suddenly, throwing the bandit to the ground. The man lay in a silent heap, his head twisted under him grotesquely.

The driverless wagon lunged around a bend, throwing cowhides in all directions. Then it became lost from view.

BUCK whirled his horse. The other bandit was fleeing into the brush and timber. Once in that labyrinthine wilderness he would be safe from pursuit. Buck knew that Mike Swanson wasn't wounded seriously. A brief glance at the man, lying there, told him that. Swanson had bumped into a rock with his head; now he was unconscious.

"After that gent, Tortilla," grunted Buck.

They started in pursuit. The distance was too great for pistol work. Buck pulled his Winchester .30-.30 from his saddleboot and raised it to his shoulder. It was hard to draw a fine bead because of his running horse. He found the sights, centered them, and pulled trigger.

But he shot too high, and before he could bring his sights down, the bandit had hit the brush.

"Spread out, Tortilla. Ride the ridges. We might be able to get him."

Tortilla Joe shook his heavy head. "No chance, Buck. He's in the brush. He could drop off'n his bronc an' plug us, *amigo*. Ambush us."

Buck reined in his sweaty bronc. "Reckon you're right, fella," he had to admit. "Let's mosey back an' see how Mike's gettin' along." . .

* * *

MIKE SWANSON had come to. He sat on the ground, a sturdy man of about twenty-three—two years younger than Buck. His fingers, holding his shoulder, were red with blood. Yet a happy grin moved across his lips when he saw Buck McKee.

"Buck! Well, I'll be—! I wasn't expectin' you to ride into this section, fella! Man, it sure is good to see you!"

Buck dismounted. "This is Tortilla Joe, Mike. He's got the habit of follerin' me aroun'. Don't let that homely face of his discourage you—he's harmless."

"*Que es?*" asked Tortilla Joe. "What's up?"

"Quite a story," said Mike Swanson.

"Me an' Tortilla were over in the Wisdom River country," said Buck. "Your letter went to Dallas, an' then was forwarded to us. Otherwise, we'd been here a coupla weeks ago, Mike. I kinda took the liberty of readin' between the lines, like the parson says. So I figured maybe me an' Tortilla oughta ride over here an' see how things really were. We was gettin' kinda tired of ridin' shotgun on the Overland Stages anyway."

Tortilla Joe smiled. "*Si*, Mike. When we first took the job the bandits they were many, no? Then we do some shotgun work when the stages was robbed an' presto—the bandits they are no more."

"How's your shoulder?" asked Buck.

Mike Swanson groaned. "Busted my collarbone, I figger. An' that lays me up so I can't handle a sixgun with my right hand. Of all the miscast luck!. . . ."

"Tortilla," said Buck, "foller the wagon an' see what happened while I tie up Mike's shoulder."

Mike was right; his shoulder was broken. Buck stripped off the young cowman's shirt and studied the wound. The bullet had hit the collarbone and been deflected. Then it had torn out again and gone on its way. There was little Buck could do beside check the bleeding.

Buck bound the wound with Mike's neck scarf. He pulled it so tight the cowman winced. Then he tore Mike's shirt into shreds and made a sling.

"What was in that sack, Mike?"

MIKE clipped his words. "Eight thousan' dollars, Buck. It was tax money belongin' to us Wolf Ridge ranchers. I was takin' it to Dogtown, the county seat. The stage company wouldn't haul it for fear they'd be held up again. I thought maybe the bandits wouldn't be suspicious if I had it under a load of hides!"

"Did you recognize the bandits?"

Mike Swanson shook his head. "Both masked, Buck." He got shakily to his feet. Buck and he walked to the fallen bandit. Buck toed him over and knelt beside him; the man was dead.

Buck pulled off the mask. A homely, bewhiskered face, emotionless and gaunt, met his gaze.

"Now do you know him, Mike?"

Mike Swanson said softly, "That's Toby Nickels, Buck. He *was* one of Len Myers' gunmen."

Buck scratched his head thoughtfully. "You told me about this Len Myers gent in your letter, Mike. Seems as though you kinda hinted he was gettin' too wide for his pants. He wants to control all of Wolf Ridge valley, is that it?"

"He controls almost all of it now," said Mike. "Three years of drouth has almost whipped us cowmen. Poor beef and no grass an' a low price for beef, too. We've shipped our taxes to the county seat three times in the last year. Each time the stage was robbed. Finally, we raised another bunch of tax money, an' now I got robbed."

"Can we prove Toby Nickels worked for Myers?"

"I doubt that, Buck. We ain't got no absolute proof. But we could try." He shook his head. "But I don't think we got a leg to stan' on. An', anyway, we lost our tax money."

"Can't you raise any more money?"

Mike Swanson shook his head again. "We're right down to the bone, Buck. We're a year behin' in our taxes now. The county gave us a year of grace to pay them in. Now that year is up a week from today."

"How about sellin' some cattle?"

"We tried that. But the buyers jus' ain't interested in beef as poor as ours. We got good stock but they're so danged gaunt, I doubt if we could raise another eight thousand dollars if we sold all our herds."

"We'll fin' a way out, Mike."

Mike smiled weakly. "Sure hope you're right, Buck."

CHAPTER II

Cottonwood Town

THE TEAM had run down the road a short distance and then turned into the brush and stopped. Tortilla Joe straightened the rig out and drove back to where Buck and Mike waited.

They loaded the dead man into the wagon. They were about four miles out of Cottonwood, the main town in the Wolf Ridge basin. Buck helped Mike up on the high wagon seat, then climbed up beside him and took the reins. The team was fidgety and pulled on the ribbons, but Buck held them with a firm hand.

Tortilla Joe followed on horseback, leading the horses belonging to Buck and the dead man.

Buck studied the surrounding country, and frowned. This was poor cow-country. For one thing, there was little grass, and what there was was eaten to the roots. But range grass was a deceptive plant. Right now, it looked as though there were no grass-roots, but if a good rain came, the grass would spring up overnight.

Buck knew there were much better rangelands in other nearby sections of Arizona. Len Myers, if he wanted land to raise cattle on, could easily have obtained control of one of these better regions. And probably have used much less gunpowder.

Buck had a hunch, suddenly, that there was more than met the eye behind Myers' desire to control the Wolf Ridge valley. He racked his brain but could not find the answer. The possession of gold or silver was definitely out. All this country had been worked by prospectors, and he knew there was no gold or silver in this region.

Buck and Mike had punched cows together over in New Mexico. That had been four years before. Then Mike had gone into Arizona and bought the Long S spread, a run-down ranch. The first year he had done well, but then the drouth came.

"An' you say your sister's with you, Mike?"

"Yeah. You don't know Jean, do you? I reckon she was in Chicago goin' to that girl's school when me an' you was ridin' range in New Mexico. Yeah, she's keepin' house for me, Buck."

* * *

TWENTY minutes later, they drove into Cottonwood, a dreary-looking, unpainted pioneer town situated on a bend in Cottonwood Creek. Sunblistered buildings—some constructed of lumber but most of them made of logs—lined both sides of the dusty, rutted main street.

Townspeople stood in doorways and under wooden awnings, staring at them. Buck McKee halted the team in front of the false-fronted building that bore the legend:

THOMAS A. HALVERSON
DOCTOR OF MEDICINE

The crowd gathered quickly; kids hollered and townspeople asked questions. Buck helped Mike into the medico's office. The doctor, a short pot-bellied man, was asleep in his

swivelchair, despite the growing clamor outside. His dirty boots rested on his spur-gouged desk.

Buck kicked the chair out from under him, and the medico crashed to the floor. He stared up at Buck, a stunned look in his eyes.

"What's the matter, fella?"

Buck said grimly, "You got a customer, Doc."

"One more fall like that," grumbled the sawbones, "an' *I'll* be a customer . . . . What'd you mean by jerkin' that chair—?"

"Get to work!" ordered Buck.

The medico looked out the fly-specked window at the dead man in the wagon. "Does he need medical care, too?"

"No," said Buck. He added, "He needs an undertaker. . . ."

THE medico went to work on Mike Swanson's shoulder. Buck went outside and elbowed his way through the group of curious people gathered around the wagon. Tortilla Joe dismounted and came up to him.

"I am sure hungry, *Senor* Buck," the Mexican said. "What would I give for a good tortilla, no? Or a dozen tortillas."

"Always thinkin' about some woman or your belly," said Buck. "Forget about eatin' for a spell, fella. See them two gents comin' through the crowd? Me, I gotta hunch they ain't so pleased 'cause this Toby Nickels gent stopped a bullet."

Tortilla Joe squinted at them. "They look *muy* mad," he murmured.

The man in the lead was a tall, raw-boned hombre, about forty-three. His face was stern, hawkish, and held great power; hair, showing from under his black Tom Watson stetson, was flecked with gray. He had one gun, the Colt riding well forward on his hip. He radiated an air of power and authority.

His companion was a short, rolling gent—tough-looking and stocky. He wore a dirty silk shirt, and California pants. His Justin boots were run-over at the heels; his cheyenne-legged chaps brush-scarred.

The tall man said to Buck, "I'm Len Myers, fella." He gestured at the dead man. "What happened to him?"

"Holdup," said Buck tersely.

Myers' heavy brows rose. "You don't say! An' who killed him?"

"I did."

"An' who are you?"

"Buck McKee. This gent here is Tortilla Joe. We're friends of Mike Swanson." Buck's tone held anger. This questioning angered him slightly. His voice was cynical. "You know this dead man, don't you, Myers?"

"Why, yes! He's Toby Nickels." Myers' impassive eyes bored into Buck's. He *used* to work for me."

"How long ago?"

"I discharged him two weeks ago." Myers' voice was a heavy purr. "Did the other bandit escape, McKee?"

Buck studied him coldly. His voice was soft. "How did you know that two bandits held up Mike Swanson, Myers?"

"What're you drivin' at, McKee?"

"We jus' drove into town, Myers. Nobody but me an' Tortilla Joe an' Mike Swanson knew there were two bandits!"

Len Myers had tipped his hand. He knew it, and his face showed it; then his face froze again, and his eyes became expressionless.

"I have ears, McKee," he murmured. "I heard a man mention the fact that there were two bandits when I came through the crowd. Maybe Tortilla Joe talked to the local citizens."

All eyes turned to Tortilla Joe. "He's right, Buck," said Tortilla. "I tol' 'em about the other bandit."

Buck said, "My error, Myers."

Myers studied Buck, his eyes heavy. There was a tense, ominous silence. Then Myers said, "Better be careful with your tongue around Cottonwood town, McKee."

"Is that a threat, Myers?"

Myers said, "Good advice, friend. . . ."

THREE townsmen, puffing and pulling, got the dead man out of the wagon, and went down the street, heading for the log cabin which was used as a morgue. Now Myers' companion spoke for the first time.

"Nickels was my friend, McKee!"

"Yeah. . . ."

Stern lines pulled the man's face. His knuckles were white against the black handles of his .45s. I'm Jeb Walker, McKee. Me an' Nickels was raised together, back in Texas! I'm gettin' you for killin' him, fella!"

Already Jeb Walker's guns were rising from their holsters. Terrified townspeople scurried away from the line of fire. One man fell flat on his face. He got to his knees and scrambled away. Then a heavy silence fell.

Walker had the edge. Buck McKee knew that. But Buck also knew another thing—that the fist was faster than a gunhand.

Quickly, he stepped forward. His right fist smashed into Walker's square jaw. The stunning blow made Walker grunt. Walker went back, his gun leaving leather. Buck lunged in and grabbed Walker's gunhand.

Walker was stunned, his eyes showed that. Buck pulled his arm back sharply, and Walker screamed. His fingers opened and he dropped his gun. Now Buck had Walker's other .45. He stepped back, breathing heavily.

Blood trickled from Walker's battered nose. He stared groggily into the bore of his own .45. Buck McKee's cold voice rang in his ears.

"Next time you pull a gun on me, Walker, I'm killin' you!"

Buck saw fear flare across Walker's eyes. Walker spat blood. His voice was a little shaky. "I'll kill *you* for this, McKee!"

Myers cut in sternly with, "Keep your shirt on, Walker! You had no reason to pick trouble with McKee! If Nickels was a bandit, he got what was comin' to him. There's been too

many holdups in this section already!"

Buck smiled tightly. He knew what was bothering Len Myers. Myers was trying to smooth things over. He wanted to make a good impression in front of the townspeople by bawling out his hired gunman.

Walker balanced himself on his bootheels, studying Buck arrogantly.

Buck unloaded Walker's gun and flipped the weapon to Myers.

"I'm sorry that happened, McKee." Myers' voice was low. "Walker lost his head. I'm sure you'll overlook his hastiness."

"You're a damned liar," said Buck tonelessly. "You'd been danged happy to see Walker kill me, Myers, an' you know it! Tell that Walker snake that the next time he wiggles across my path he better be sure to use his cutters!"

Myers studied him coldly. Buck thought for a moment that the man would pull his guns. His eyes were small dark beads. Then Myers turned and strode into the Bootstrap Saloon.

Buck watched him leave, his eyes heavy with conjecture. Myers was a deadly foe. He was strong, brutal—but he was cunning. Buck looked at fat Tortilla Joe. For the first time, he noticed the Mexican's gun.

"You fat hellion," he said, smiling. "You cover every play, huh?"

"Si," said Tortilla Joe. Suddenly he saw a restaurant down the street. *"Amigo, yo tengo hambre!* I am hungry! I sure could cover a plate of tortillas right pronto. *Vamos!"*

CHAPTER III

Outlaw Hangout

MYERS strode into the Bootstrap, his bootheels pounding. Several of his gunmen, drinking at the bar, turned as he entered. But their boss had no word for them. Nor had he any word for the other gunhands playing poker in the far corner of the long saloon.

Myers entered his office, there in the rear. He closed the door behind him. His dark face showed conflicting emotions.

Jeb Walker was washing his bloody face in the corner washbasin. When Myers entered, Walker whirled suddenly, his hands falling to his empty holsters. Myers' scowl deepened.

"You've gone trigger crazy, Walker! Your nerves are shot to hell!" Myers tossed Walker the .45s taken from him by Buck McKee. "You pull your guns too slow, Walker, an' you pull them at the wrong time."

"What'd you mean?"

"Buck McKee's a dangerous man. One look ought to tell you that. Tortilla Joe may seem slow, easygoing—but did you see him pull his gun out there in the street? Never pick a fight in front of a bunch of people. It looks bad for us. Makes us look like cheap barroom fighters."

"But—"

"Bide your time, Walker. There's always another day."

"But Toby Nickels was my friend."

"T'Hades with Toby! He took a chance—an' lost! He always knew that some day a bullet would tag him! Well, we got the tax money; that's what we wanted. The ranchers are really behin' the wrong bull now."

"They've still got a week to raise more money," warned Walker.

"They can't raise it, Walker."

"They could sell some horses," said Walker. "The Army wants mounts for the cavalry. They're goin' to use lots of broncs in the Philippines and in Cuba. They could round up a herd of broomtails, sell 'em to Uncle Sam, an' pay off their tax bill."

Myers frowned. "Them broncs are back in the rough country, Walker, an' they're plumb wild. Booger at the sight of a rider an' run like Hades through the brush. No, I don't figure they can gather a herd in a week. We got 'em with a mane an' tail hold, fella."

"Yeah—mebbe. . . ."

Myers buckled on a pair of leather chaps. He took a Winchester .25-.35 from the wall rack, levered it, saw that a cartridge was in the barrel.

"We're ridin', Walker!"

"Where?"

"To the Cabin, of course. Redbird'll be waitin' there with the tax money. Bring your rifle with you."

They left by the back door. They went to the livery barn, saddled a roan and a buckskin, and rode out of Cottonwood, heading south toward the badlands on the Mexican border.

* * *

THE nearer Buck McKee and Tortilla Joe and Mike Swanson got to the Swanson Long S outfit, the poorer the range became. Finally the grass consisted of nothing more than burned-out clumps of bunchgrass and foxtail.

"This is the worst range in the basin," said Buck.

"There ees no grass at all," agreed Tortilla Joe. "Eet ees so dry I cannot spit, *amigos*." He squirted tobacco juice on the rump of one of the horses.

"You do all right," said Buck.

Mike Swanson said, "See that hill over yonder, Buck? Well, Crystal Lake is situated right the other side of that hill. I own Crystal Lake. When most of the other water holes are dry like they are now, the cattle stay pretty close to Crystal Lake. That's what makes the grass so short here."

"Has Myers got plenty of water, Mike?"

"Yeah. He's got enough for his own use. No, he doesn't want my range because of the lake. He can get along all right with the water he has. There must be somethin' else behin' it."

"Wonder what it is?"

Mike scratched his jaw with his good hand. "Danged if I know, Buck."

Buck pushed the team to a faster trot. He tried to fit the puzzle together. The more he saw of the Wolf Ridge basin the more he became convinced that some other ulterior motive was motivating Len Myers' desire to control this country.

He wished he knew what it was.

THE Swanson ranch house was a long, rambling building built of cottonwood logs. It was situated at the base of a long slanting hill. The horse corrals and the one bunkhouse were built on the hill behind the house. The drabness of the dull-looking house and its surroundings was broken somewhat by the livid colors of the geraniums and petunias that grew in the flower-beds along the front.

Jean Swanson was a pretty, slim, light-haired girl. She ran to meet them, and when she saw her brother's arm in a sling, alarm showed in her blue eyes.

"What happened, Mike?"

Mike told her. Dismay moved across her face, and her lips trembled. "An'—an' they got the money. Oh, Mike, we'll lose the Long S!"

"Over my dead body!" said Mike.

"But what will we do?"

"We'll have to raise the money some way, Jean."

"The other ranchers had their money stolen too," said the girl. "That will be hard on them."

"Maybe I should have had some guards ridin' with the wagon," said Mike. "Then we might have got the money through. But we all agreed that if I acted like I was just haulin' out a load of cowhides we might bluff our way through without a holdup. Maybe it's my fault!"

Jean's brow furrowed. "Now how did those bandits find out you had the money under the hides?"

"That," declared Mike, "is what I'd like to know. Somebody must've told Len Myers. But who knew about it? Only the cowmen who had money in the sack. And they sure wouldn't tell." He told her about Toby Nickels' death under Buck McKee's gun.

"Toby Nickels worked for Myers!" she declared.

"But we can't prove that," explained Mike wearily. "The judge would never swear out a warrant for Len Myers on those grounds. Myers claims he fired Nickels over two weeks ago."

"Who was the other bandit?"

"We don't know."

Mike introduced Buck McKee and Tortilla Joe. Jean's eyes lighted as she shook Buck's hand. "I've heard

so much about you from Mike, Buck, that I feel I know you already."

"Was it good or bad?" asked Buck, smiling.

Jean's lips pursed. "Bad," she said mischievously. "Very bad. . . ."

"Then," said Tortilla Joe stoutly, "your brother was speakin' the truth, *Senorita!*"

They all laughed. Jean said, "Why, come inside, boys. I'll get Maria to fix up some food."

"Maria?" asked Tortilla Joe.

"She's our Mexican cook, Tortilla. She's more than a cook—she literally raised me. You see, Mother died when I was fifteen."

"Maria," repeated Tortilla Joe. "She ees a nice name, no?"

Buck said, "There's two things Tortilla Joe is interested in. Eatin' is one of them. That's how he got his name. Down in Sonora, at a *baille*, they held a tortilla-eatin' contest. Joe won, hands down."

"Maria makes splendid tortillas," Jean assured him.

THE Long S *mozo*, a stoop-shouldered oldster named Concho, took the team to the barn. They went inside. The log house was cool. Rag rugs covered the soft wood floors. There was a rock fireplace and a bearskin rug lay in front of it. The place showed signs of good care and good housekeeping.

They found chairs. Jean went into the kitchen. Soon she came back with some tall glasses on a tray. Buck sipped his drink and smiled to himself. The drink, he decided, tasted good.

Jean asked, "What are you smiling about, Buck?"

Buck's smile grew. "First time since I left home that I've drank anythin' besides water an' whiskey."

Jean smiled. "An' you, Tortilla Joe?"

"Me, too, *Senorita* Jean. Me, I do not dreenk wheeskey, though. Tequila, she ees my drink. Tequila an' mescal."

Mike slumped in his chair, his brow serious. "Wonder what the next move'll be, Buck?"

"Call the ranchers together," suggested Buck, "an' hold a meetin'. Maybe we can boil up some way outa this. Can't you borrow any money, Mike?"

Mike shook his head. "Not a chance. We've tried that. Besides ownin' the only general store in Cottonwood, Len Myers also owns the Bootstrap Saloon and the only bank. An' he sure wouldn't lend us any dinero."

"You ever try?"

"Swallered my pride once, Buck, an' asked him for a loan. He looked at me an' asked me if I felt all right. We dang near went for our guns. Jean got me outa there jus' in time or one of us woulda been killed."

"How about the bank in the county seat?"

"Myers owns the controllin' interest in that, too. An' there's only one bank there. I asked a couple local citizens down there for a loan. When they heard I intended to pay my taxes with it they said it was too big a risk. But that wasn't the reason. We'll get rain soon an' there'll be plenty of grass. They were afraid of crossin' Len Myers. He's a big man hereabouts, Buck, an' a dangerous man."

Buck smiled. "We'll pin the deadwood on him," he promised.

"But how?"

"There'll be a way."

"*Si*," said Tortilla Joe. "There is always a loophole, no?"

"Let's hope so," said Jean.

The door in the kitchen banged. Jean got to her feet. "That's Maria," she said. "She was gatherin' eggs."

A fat, heavy woman, wearing a clean gingham dress, waddled into the room. She was, Buck figured, about thirty-three, which was Tortilla Joe's age. Inexpensive bracelets almost covered her sun-tanned arms. Jean introduced her.

Buck watched Tortilla Joe's face. There was, he noticed, a slightly alarmed look there. And Tortilla Joe had plenty of reason for alarm.

Maria barely acknowledged the introduction to Buck. In fact, she did not shake hands with him. But she shook Tortilla Joe's hand heartily.

"I am *so* glad to meet you, Tortilla Joe!"

Her eyes, Tortilla Joe decided, held a hungry look. Tortilla Joe felt a strange uneasiness run through his gross body.

"*You sure are,*" he murmured.

CHAPTER IV

The Cabin

MYERS rode in the lead. Big, staunch, he rode fast, his face set in grim lines. Walker rode a pace behind his boss. Their broncs were breathing heavily and sweat rimmed the edges of Myers' saddle blanket.

They swept through the foothills. Neither man spoke. Each played with his thoughts, and each found his thoughts bitter.

Myers was playing for big game—an empire was at stake. Now Buck McKee, aided by Tortilla Joe, had ridden into the Wolf Ridge basin. Would their presence endanger his empire?

Myers thought not. Sooner or later, one or both of them would cross his path, and he, or one of his gunhands, would kill them. And they would be out of his way—for good.

Walker rode slouched in the saddle, his hard face drawn into severe lines. There was a touch of fear in Jeb Walker's heart, fear of Buck McKee and his guns. And then, too, there was Tortilla Joe, The Mexican, Walker knew, was a gunslinger, a tough man despite his seemingly easy exterior.

Now they were in the rough country along the border. Ahead, dim in the distance, stretched the Mexican wastelands of upper Sonora, a lonesome dreary land of sand and scrubpine and scraggly brush. Heat waves danced over the rolling land, and there seemed to be no limit to the expanse of the wilderness.

There were few cattle in this locality. Of course, a few wild *orejanos*—native wild cattle—hid out in the brush and oak clumps, ready to make a wild run upon sighting a horse and rider. They were longhorned, gaunt beasts, skinny and wiry, and made poor beef—so poor, in fact, that nobody bothered them. This fact, coupled with the fact that the small number of *orejanos* made a roundup unprofitable, accounted for their presence in this section.

Here ranged the wild horses. Most of them were branded stock which had made a break for freedom into the rough country to escape the saddle. Some, of course, were native wild stock—unbranded, long-maned, and wild as thistledown. Let a rider be skylined against the horizon and they would be on their way, their hoofs jarring the earth as they loped up a canyon.

A FEW years before, three purebred Morgan stallions had escaped from a local ranch, and disappeared into the rough country. Attempts by riders to rout them from their lairs had failed. But after the stallions had escaped, the native wild mares threw some fine colts. Long-legged, long-necked horses as fast as goats over the rocks and through the brush.

Mostly they were bays and blacks. Young, clean-limbed animals. They knew the badlands well; knew the few water holes, the best grazing lands. And, in a land where a barn-raised horse would have starved to death, they were glossy and sleek, and hard as steel.

One band, a long-maned stallion standing guard on the hill, was grazing on a high butte, a mile away. Jeb Walker studied the wild horses through his field-glasses.

"Twelve broncs, Len. Most of the mares have colts. Four young stallions in the bunch, too. Them's the kind of broncs the Army wants for its cavalry units, Myers."

"The Army'll never get them broncs, Walker."

Walker spat tobacco juice. "What if the ranchers get together an' stage a roundup an' try to gather these broncs to pay their tax bills?"

Myers turned to face him.

"They might be able to gather a few, but they can't gather enough

head to pay their bills. No, Jeb, we got 'em over a barrel."

When they got closer, the stallion whinnied a warning. The herd became alert, ears pricked. The stallion pranced and whinnied again. The herd turned and fled, running through the brush.

Long-legged colts followed their dams. The young stallions brought up the rear, nipping the laggards. Soon the herd had disappeared. Only a cloud of dust, hanging motionless in the thin air, showed the signs of their passing. Their speedy disappearance brought a small smile to Len Myers' gaunt lips.

"No," he said, "they'll never gather those broncs, Jeb."

THE SUN was sinking when they reached the Cabin. The Cabin had once been an outlaw hangout. But the outlaw, his red day a thing of the past, had been driven from this Arizona country. Those who had not fled before the stern guns of the Arizona rangers had died under lead and became a permanent part of the territory's soil.

The Cabin was an ugly, unpainted frame building. Situated next to a deep cutbank, it sat on a mesa, overlooking the unrolling panorama below. From its doorway, a man could see miles to the north and east and west. From there, he could see any rider who happened to move across that lonely expanse of land that stretched endlessly below him. It made an ideal lookout.

Their broncs were covered with sweat when they rode into the brush flanking the dim trail that led upward to the Cabin. Now a stern voice, laden with authority, made them draw rein.

"*Quien va?* Who goes there?

Myers said angrily, "What's the matter with your eyes, Jeff? Can't you even recognize me?"

The brush parted, and a renegade stepped out, his rifle covering them. He was a thin, dirty man. A jagged scar covered his right cheek. A knife had made that scar in a Sonora *cantina* brawl over a drunken dancehall girl.

"Just makin' danged sure nobody sneaks into the Cabin, Len."

Myers said, "I oughta—"

Jeb Walker cut in. "He's only follerin' your orders, Len. You tol' him to stop everybody that rode toward the Cabin."

"All right," grunted Myers.

They rode on. Once again, farther down the trail, a man stepped from his concealment, covering them with his six-shooters. The brush was spiked with guards. When they dismounted in front of the Cabin, a guard stood in the doorway, rifle under his arm.

"You bring out any chuck?" he asked.

"Cassell will bring out some grub tomorrow," said Myers.

"We're short of chow," the man grumbled. " We've killed off most of the brush-rabbits aroun' here. Yesterday Ben shot a jack-rabbit. I cooked it up, an' it was like chewin' soaked rawhide."

"You'll have plenty grub tomorrow," Myers assured him. "Has Redbird showed up yet?"

"Ain't seen hide or hair of him, Boss."

"Dang him," growled Myers, "if he's run into Mexico with that money, figgerin' on stealin' it for himself, I'm huntin' him down an' workin' him over with a dull scalpin' knife!"

"He'll show up," Walker said confidently.

"He better."

THEY CLOMPED into the Cabin. A heavy-shouldered, handsome young man of about twenty-five was sitting at the warped, homemade table. He was playing a listless game of solitaire with a greasy deck of cards. He wore the natty suit of the United States cavalry.

Myers said, "Hello, Henning."

The man looked up. His brown eyes were level. "*Lieutenant* Henning to you, Myers," he said evenly.

Myers studied him hard. "Still ridin' that high-horse, I see," he murmured. "Well, Henning, you ready to sign them papers yet?"

"I'm signing nothing, Myers. When

I get out of here and tell my commanding officer that you kidnapped me and held me prisoner, the United States cavalry'll move in here and clean you and your gang of cutthroats out of Arizona. I sign no papers with a renegade killer!"

Myers' stern face was a study in anger. "Inside of a week," he said, I'll own all of the Wolf Ridge basin. Then I'll sell it to the Army for a good price—a danged good price. Then they can go ahead an' build that remount station out on the edge of Crystal Lake. But until I get deed to the basin, you're stayin' here, fella."

"When I get free, I'll drag you into Army court."

"Maybe," drawled Myers, "you never will get free, Henning."

"So that's your game," said Henning. He leaned back in his chair, his face harsh, drawn. "Get the land, an' then murder me. But still I won't sign that bill of sale. And without my signature, the deal is no good. Ever think of that, Myers?"

"Maybe we don't need your signature, Henning. . . ."

"So that's the way the cards lie," murmured the cavalry man. "Murder me and forge my signature onto the bill of sale saying that I had bought the basin for an extravagant price with the government's money. But how would you cover up your murder of me, Myers?"

"That wouldn't be hard."

Henning smiled, "I'm interested," he said.

"Three days ago you came into the basin. You thought that, because of my letter to headquarters, I owned the Wolf Ridge basin. Then you found out I didn't own the Crystal Lake region—"

"We know that," said Henning. "Tell us something new."

"Well, I could say I had signed the bill of sale with you. Then, accordin' to my story, you had started back for Tucson. But you never get to Tucson, *sabe?*"

"You think that story would cover you, Myers?"

"I don't think so," growled Myers; "I know. There's quite a stretch of desolate country between Cottonwood and Tucson. The Injuns aren't any too friendly toward lone white men—especially lone cavalry men. The Injuns don't like soldiers since the cavalry annihilated Chief White Robe at Chimney Rock a few months ago. Easy for any man—let alone a soldier—to disappear between here an' Tucson."

Henning smiled. "You don't miss any angles, do you?" There was a hint of admiration in his voice.

Myers said, "I can't afford to, Henning." He added, "Why not sign them papers, Henning?"

"No."

"You'll get your cut, man. You can desert an' go into Mexico with a bank roll. Start an outfit down there on American dollars an' live like a king."

"I may get a cut," said Henning, "but I'd never live to spend it."

"I guarantee your safety into Mexico."

"Your word, Myers, is no good with me."

Myers' lips hardened. "You're signing your own death warrant, fella!"

Henning spoke softly. "I'd rather die a brave man, Myers, than die as a deserter."

Myers smiled with his lips only. "You've had your choice."

Now Walker spoke from the doorway. "There's a rider coming'," he said. "An it looks like Redbird, Boss."

"That's him," said Myers.

CHAPTER V

War-Talk

CONCHO, THE Long S *mozo*, rode out to tell the Wolf Ridge ranchers about the loss of their tax money. That dusk the cowmen started coming into the Long S. They came on horseback, in buggies, and in wagons. Some of them brought their women and children.

They were a grim, taciturn group. They were up against a blank wall; their rough faces showed their consternation. They exchanged brief

greetings and filed into the Long 8 parlor. All of them packed guns. The gravity of the situation showed clearly in what little talk they did make.

Mike Swanson called the meeting to order. There were eight cowmen remaining in the Wolf Ridge basin. Len Myers and his gunmen had either bought out the remainder, or driven them from the valley. These men had hung onto their lands and homes through drouth, threats, coercion, and gunsmoke.

Mike told them about the holdup.

"You ain't to blame, Mike," a grizzled oldster said. "We all agreed to let you try to get the money into the county seat under a load of hides. The thing, is how did Myers learn we was movin' the *dinero* in that manner?"

"That's what we all would like to know," said another.

"Myers ain't no fool," said a short man. "He mighta suspicioned we'd make a move like that, an' he jus' headed us off. The thing to solve now is, whats our next move?"

"We can't replace the money," said a tall, gangly man. He had a long nose and whiskers covered his pointed jaw. His bib overalls were dirty and his boots run over at the heels.

"Then what'll we do?"

The tall man said, "We're whipped, Neighbors. We ain't got a chance now. I say we leave this danged basin. Leave our few head of cattle, our land an' our buildings. The odds against us are just too big to whip!"

"Not me," grunted a cowman. "I settled this country—fought the Injuns for it, an' I whupped the redskins. I've fought drouth an' rustlers an' border-jumpers, an' I've whupped them, too. I'm not pullin' out."

"But where," asked the tall man, "can we raise eight thousan' dollars?"

"We can't do it," said another, shaking his head. "I wonder where our tax money is now?"

Another said hotly, "Prob'ly down in Myers' office in Cottonwood! I'm for ridin' into town an' burning down the Bootstrap Saloon an' Myers' store! I'm for callin' Myers an' his gunhands an' smokin' it out with them!"

"An' gettin' killed, too," finished the tall man. "No, friends, we're whipped. There's only one thing we can do—an' that's move out!"

Buck sat beside Mike Swanson. He studied the tall man under lidded eyes. Evidently this man did not want any violence, and he looked like a fighting man. He was advocating peace when he stood in a position to lose his lands, his herds.

"What's his name?" asked Buck.

"Smithers."

"How long has he been in the Wolf Ridge basin?"

"Just a shade more'n two years—as near as I can recollect. Fact is, he's about the only fella in the valley that could be classified as a newcomer. Why?"

"Jus' curious."

Mike spoke to the ranchers. "Any other plans?"

MOST of the cowmen were in favor of riding into Cottonwood and shooting it out with Len Myers and his gunhands. Then a bowlegged man spoke to Buck.

"You've been around quite a bit, Buck. What would you advise us to do?"

All eyes turned on Buck. A short silence, tense with hope, followed. Buck spoke slowly.

"I'm a newcomer here, Men," he said. "An' you prob'ly know the full facts of your case better'n I do. But I've talked it over with Mike. Borrowin' any more money is out of the question. But I can't see any sense in you men ridin' into Cottonwood an' stagin' a gunfight. You men have responsibilities—you have your wives and kids to think about."

"Well?"

"The Army needs cavalry horses," continued Buck. "Needs them bad, too, to carry on the war with Spain. Now if we had some broncs to sell to the Army—"

"But we ain't got none, McKee."

"Could we get hold of some?" asked Buck.

Cowmen exchanged glances. They were all thinking, suddenly, of the

wild horses running along the border. If the Army had those horses—

"We got a week," said one man. "We could give it a try."

"How about it?" asked Mike Swanson. "All in favor of tryin' to run some wild broncs out of the badlands, raise your right hand."

One rancher grinned and said, "They say a drowndin' man'll hang onto anythin', Men. I'm for it."

"So'm I, Mike."

Smithers was the last to raise his hand. Then the discussion about the coming roundup began. It was decided to pull a round-up wagon out of the Long S at daybreak the next morning. They had to act fast, for time was running against them.

Grim-faced, they discussed details. They were short-handed, short of money, and their horses were gaunt and underfed. Yet, despite these odds, they were going to do what no group of men had ever done before —run the wild horses out of the border country.

The meeting broke up then. Win Ling, the Long S Chinese cook, served the group doughnuts and coffee. Jean Swanson and some of the other women assisted the Oriental.

Mike Swanson and Buck leaned against the wall, talking. "I don't see why Myers won't lend you dinero on your land," said Buck. "That way, he would eventually get the land anyway, when he foreclosed."

"That's true," said Mike, frowning. "But maybe he thinks the rain'll come an' we can pay him back."

"That might be it," admitted Buck, frowning. "But it seems to me there's somethin' else behin' his logic, though. I wonder what it is?"

"I sure don't know, Buck."

Smithers came up and the talk switched to the round-up. Once again, the man made a deep impression upon Buck. For one thing, Buck knew Smithers was a gunman — he wore his twin .45s tied low on his thighs. The guns showed signs of use. And he noticed that never, at any time, did Smithers' hands stray far from his holstered weapons.

Buck wandered off. He thought nobody had seen him when he slipped out the door. But he was mistaken. Smithers had seen him.

* * *

TORTILLA JOE had been sitting beside the bunkhouse playing his harmonica, when Maria found him. She had changed clothes. Now she wore a gay silk blouse and a ruffled skirt. She looked bigger than ever.

"Ah, *Senor,* I have found you, no?"

Tortilla Joe lowered his mouth-organ. He looked like a cornered animal.

"Continue to play, *Senor,*" said Maria. "Your *musica* ees heavenly."

"Heavenly!" Tortilla Joe's brown eyes showed surprise. "Buck don't call it that. He's got another name for it."

"*Senor* Buck!" said Maria. "What do we care about what he says? I say your *musica* ees divine." Her voice lowered. "Now I want you to come to my cabin. . . ."

"What fer?" Suspiciously.

"A surprise, Tortilla."

Tortilla Joe got to his feet. "I gotta go in the house an' listen to the meetin'. I'll bet you Buck is lookin' for me right now." He added, "What ees thees—er—er—surprise?"

"Some tortillas," said Maria. "An' I have cooked them weeth my own leetle hands."

She held out her hands. They were, Tortilla Joe saw, anything but little. Tortilla Joe balanced the thing in his mind. He wanted to go to the meeting—and he wanted a tortilla. He didn't like fat women. He didn't like the possessive note in Maria's voice. It was a struggle between his better sense and his stomach. And his stomach won.

"Who told you I liked tortillas?"

"*Senor* Buck."

"All right," said Tortilla Joe, "I eat some of your tortillas, *Senora.*"

"Maria to you," corrected the fat woman.

Maria waddled toward her cabin, set apart from the Long S ranchhouse. Her back was so broad it would have done justice to a young ox.

"Maybe, Maria, I should go to the meetin'—"

"Oh, come now!" Her voice took a

slightly harsh tone. "Eet ees supper time, Tortilla Joe."

She hooked her arm in his and towed him into her cabin. The walls were decorated with knick-knacks and Mexican pictures. The table was already set with Indian pottery. She seated him at the head of the table and waddled into the kitchen, her cheap bracelets jingling.

TORTILLA Joe glanced around hurriedly for an avenue of escape. There was an open window behind him; the door, too, was open. But to get to the door he would have to cross the room, and Maria would see him through the kitchen door. The window offered the only chance of escape.

He started from his chair. Just then Maria came out of the kitchen carrying a tray with six tortillas. Tortilla Joe studied the tortillas, a sinking feeling in his stomach.

A tortilla consists of beans and spices rolled up in a thin sort of pancake made of flour. Then it is baked in an oven. Usually the covering is thin, crispy.

Tortilla Joe regarded these tortillas speculatively. The covering on these looked like thick saddle leather. He poked one gingerly with his fork. Maria watched him, her eyes hardening.

"You don't like them, no?"

"They look good," lied Tortilla Joe.

Finally Tortilla found a softer spot. He jabbed in his fork. The tines almost buckled. He bore down harder. He tried to cut off a piece with a common table knife. It was like cutting rubber.

Maria glared, and handed him a butcher knife. He sawed off a piece and stuck it in his mouth.

"You like it, no?" asked Maria.

Tortilla Joe mumbled something indistinguishable. Was he saying *yes* or *no?* Maria thought he had said *yes.* Tortilla Joe gulped, and swallowed.

"Some coffee, please."

Maria hurried into the kitchen, her face beaming. Her dog, a flea-bitten hound, sat under the table at Tortilla Joe's boots, plainly begging. Tortilla sawed off another piece of the tortilla and gave it to the dog.

The dog bit into it, then dropped it. He kept on begging.

Now Maria spoke from the kitchen. "Here comes the coffee."

The coffee came but Tortilla Joe never drank it. For Tortilla Joe had exited via the window. Once outside, he sprinted for the bunk-house and, hidden there, he crouched behind a corner and watched.

Maria came to the door, her face showing anger. Yet her voice held a sudden soft note. "Oh, Tortilla Joe!"

Tortilla Joe did not answer. He circled the bunk-house and entered Win Ling's kitchen. Tortilla Joe took a chair.

"Serve me, China boy," he said grandly.

Win Ling poured him a cup of coffee and slid a can of doughnuts across the table to him. Tortilla Joe crammed his mouth full until he had difficulty in speaking.

"Keep one eye out the door an' on Maria's cabin, China boy. If'n that woman comes thees direction jus' holler to me an' open the back door on the run!"

* * *

BUCK McKee was saddling his horse. He was pulling the latigo strap tight when Mike Swanson found him.

"Where you goin', Buck?"

"Wolf Ridge."

"What for?"

"Myers prob'ly has your tax money. And, unless I miss my guess, it should be in his office back of the Bootstrap Saloon."

"I'll go with you."

"No, Mike."

"I will—"

Buck's voice lowered. "You're wounded, Mike. You can't handle a gun well with your left hand. Let me do this by myself."

Mike said slowly, "But be careful, man. Where's Tortilla Joe?"

"Prob'ly aroun' somewhere."

Tortilla Joe heard Buck ride past the kitchen. He ran to the door. "Hey Buck!"

But already Buck was beyond hear-

ing. Tortilla Joe ran back to the table, grabbed a handful of doughnuts from the can, stuffed three in his mouth. Then he put the rest of the doughnuts back in the can, grabbed the can and ran out with it.

His saddled horse was tied to the corral. He swung into leather, grabbed his reins, and rode out after Buck, the doughnut can under one arm. Win Ling, swearing shrilly, ran after him, wielding a butcher knife.

"Bring back my doughnuts—"

But Tortilla Joe rode harder. Already, Buck had more than a half-a-mile lead, and Buck rode a faster horse. With a sinking heart, Tortilla Joe knew that Buck would beat him by over a mile into Cottonwood.

CHAPTER VI

Death Comes Softly

THERE AT the Cabin, Len Myers and Walker stood in the doorway, watching Redbird ride in. And Len Myers' eyes were inscrutable.

Redbird was a short, runty half-breed. He rode a wide-horned Mexican saddle, and he wore moccasins. He toted a worn .44 on his hips. A carbine rode in his saddle-holster.

"Where you been all this time?" asked Myers.

"They jumped me," said the 'breed, "when we held up Swanson. They shot Toby—"

"We know that," said Myers. "Toby's dead. Tortilla Joe an' Buck McKee was the gents that you gunned it out with."

Redbird's eyes widened. "Buck McKee!"

"You know him?"

"Over in New Mexico, two years ago, I was breakin' broncs for the Slash T. This Buck McKee, he was ridin' line there. Tortilla Joe was with him. They're tough hombres, Myers."

"Not too tough, though. Where you been?"

"They chased me. I doubled back into the badlands figurin' they were followin' me. Then I headed for the Cabin. How long you been waitin'?"

"Too long. Where's the *dinero?*"

Redbird dismounted. He untied a sack from his saddle and tossed it to Myers. They went inside. Myers pulled a chair up to the table, emptied the sack on the table. Dollars, bills, quarters.

"Looks like church collection," he murmured.

Lieutenant Henning stood by the window. He said, "You'd even rob a church, Myers."

"Some day you'll eat that, Henning." Myers counted the money. Two thousand dollars was in ten-dollar bills. He counted the change, stacking it in neat rows. Redbird's eyes narrowed.

"You don't trust me, huh? You figger I stole some of that eight thousan', that it?"

"I trust nobody."

"I could have stole the whole thing," said Redbird. "I could have hit across the border with it an' you'd never got it, Myers."

"I'd have trailed you," said Myers.

Redbird shrugged. "Maybe—maybe not." He looked at Jeb Walker's swollen face. "Who'd you tangle with?"

"Buck McKee."

Redbird smiled. "McKee's handy with his fists."

"You don't need to tell me," said Walker, grinning.

"I'm leavin' the states," said Redbird. "I'm headin' into Mexico. I don't want no part of McKee an' Tortilla Joe. Where's my cut, Myers?"

"Here you are, fella."

Redbird counted the bills. Myers watched him, one hand on his holstered gun, his eyes probing. But Redbird was too fast; suddenly his old .44 was out, covering Walker and Myers.

"You promised me two thousan'! There's only one thousan' here!" He cocked his gun. The click ran loudly across the silent room. One of Myers' guards, who was also in the cabin, inched his fingers toward his Colts. Redbird's voice became steel. "Don't, Clem. . . ."

The guard drew his hand back.

Myers said, "My mistake, Redbird."

He counted another thousand. Redbird stepped forward, picked it up, then backed to the door his gun level.

"Unbuckle your gunbelts, men."

MYERS' gun and belt fell to the floor; so did the weapons and belts of the guard and Walker. Redbird scooped them up. He looked at Lieutenant Henning.

"Here's your chance to make a getaway, Army man."

Henning smiled and said, "You'll never do it, Redbird. The guards'll get you. If it was night, I'd sure take your offer, fella."

Redbird said, "Okay, gents."

The 'breed wheeled and ran for his horse, standing with trailing reins a few yards outside the door. He had not noticed the rifle leaning in the corner. He had one moccasin in the stirrup when Myers broke from the cabin, the rifle up.

Len Myers shot twice. One bullet missed, the other smashed into Redbird's scrawny chest, doubling him over.

Redbird's .44 roared. But Myers' bullet, coming the instant before, turned the 'breed's aim, sending his lead plowing harmlessly into the Cabin. Redbird's second bullet plowed into the ground.

Then Redbird dropped the gun. His terrified horse ran a few feet, then tangled its forefeet in his bridle-reins, and halted. Redbird's knees buckled and he went down, flat on his face.

Myers walked forward, toed the limp form over, picked the bills from Redbird's breast pocket, and returned to the Cabin. Henning's smile was cold. "Another mark against your black record, Myers."

Myers said, "I oughta kill you now, Henning."

Henning was silent. Myers put the money back into the sack. Walker went outside. He returned soon.

"Redbird's still breathin', Myers." Walker had retrieved the guns and belts taken by Redbird. He tossed one to Myers, and buckled on his own.

"He won't live long. Can't. Unload his rifle an' six-shooter. Then, if he does come to, he'll be harmless."

"Mebbe we oughta finish him."

"Let him suffer. He'll kick the bucket in a little while." Myers spoke now to the guard. "Clem, watch this Army man close."

"Sure will, Myers."

Myers and Walker went to the broncs and mounted.

"What about the tax money?" asked Walker. "We goin' take it to your office downtown?"

"We'll bury it until this blows over."

* * *

UNNOTICED, Smithers had gone to his horse, and ridden hard toward Cottonwood. He did not ride the wagon-road; he took shortcuts. Scraggly buckbrush blocked his path, but he spurred his sweating horse ahead. He rode hard.

Once, on a hill, he drew rein and studied the valley below. The moon had risen, clothing the rolling hills with yellow light, but Smithers had no eyes for the golden beauty of the night. He had eyes only for the horseman riding below him. For the horseman was Buck McKee.

He knew, then, that he would beat Buck into Cottonwood. Had he thought to glance in the direction of the Long S, he would have seen Tortilla Joe—but Smithers swung his bronc, and loped toward Cottonwood.

For Smithers had been hiding in the barn when Buck told Mike Swanson that he was riding into Cottonwood to raid Len Myers' office to search for the stolen money.

The moon was very high when Smithers reached Cottonwood. The ugly town lay basking in the golden light. Smithers did not ride up to the Bootstrap Saloon. Had he done that, local people might suspect him of allegiance with Len Myers. He dismounted in front of the Town House, Cottonwood's only hotel.

"Seen Jeb Walker?" he asked the clerk.

"Him an' Len Myers rode outa town a while back. Coupla hours ago, I'd say. What'd you wanta see Jeb about?"

"Why ask?"

"Jus' figured it kinda funny that

a farmer'd want to see Jeb Walker, Len Myers' gunhand."

"Walker owes me five bucks. Poker game."

"You'll never collect it," said the clerk.

Smithers went outside. He moved up the sidewalk, ducked in between two buildings, and went back to the alley. He climbed the creaking stairs leading up to the hotel's second story. The clerk never knew he was in the building.

He went down the illy lighted hall and entered a room with a key. Then, sitting beside the window, unnoticeable by anybody on the street, he watched the main stem of the town.

Kerosene lamps glowed in the windows of various business houses. A lobo wolf howled in the distance and the local curs took up an excited yapping. Smithers consulted his Ingersoll watch.

Thirty minutes later, Len Myers and Jeb Walker rode into town and rein-tied their horses in front of the hotel. Soon, he heard them coming up the stairs. The door opened, and they entered.

"Howdy, Men," said Smithers.

"What're you doin' here?" asked Myers.

Smithers told him about the ranchers' meeting.

"An' Buck McKee is ridin' in to rob my office, huh?" said Myers, grinning. "Playin' right into our hands. Tortilla Joe with him?"

"He stayed at the Long S."

CHAPTER VII

Gun-Trap!

BUCK M'KEE reached Cottonwood fifteen minutes after Smithers had ridden into town. He rode down a tin-can littered alley and pulled his bronc up beneath the heavy shadow of an outbuilding. He studied the alley.

Across the alley was the Bootstrap Saloon. Len Myers' office was dark. Buck dismounted, ground-tying his horse.

He sidled up to the office's one dirty window, and looked in. The moonlight showed the interior clearly. A roll-top desk, the top down, stood against the opposite wall. Against the other wall was a small safe. The door leading into the Bootstrap barroom was closed. Probably locked, Buck figured.

Buck tried the window. It was evidently nailed down securely from the inside. If he broke the pane the noise would be heard in the barroom. He went to the door.

He laid his shoulder against it, and pushed. It did not give a fraction of an inch. He would have to jimmy it open.

He saw a scrap pile of discarded farming machinery behind the hardware store, two doors down the alley. He rummaged hurriedly through this and found a leaf from a discarded buggy spring.

He inserted the thin spring between the door and the casing. He put his weight against the thin steel. The spring bent. Wood creaked. Then the door swung inward on squeaky hinges.

He stood against the building, listening. Evidently nobody had heard him. He could hear men talking in the barroom. He glanced up and down the alley; nobody in sight.

He went to the safe, hunkered beside it. He had expected it to be locked. But the door swung open to his grip on the dial. He knew, then, he had guessed wrong. If Myers had had the money in the office, the safe would have been locked.

He rummaged through the safe. Some legal papers, some correspondence, but no money. Then he rolled back the desk-top, and searched it. No money here, either, though he had hardly expected to find any. The din of voices from the barroom was increasing as the night progressed. The sounds carried clearly through the closed door.

He went through a sheaf of letters, looking for some clue as to why Len Myers should suddenly desire the Wolf Ridge range. But the letters told him nothing.

He did not light a lamp. The moonlight, streaming through the window, was very bright. Because

of the din in the barroom, he did not hear the key turn slowly in the door.

Suddenly, the door leading to the saloon whipped open. Quickly Buck whirled, his hands falling to his holstered guns, but he was too late.

For Myers and Walker stepped into the room. And their guns, level and demanding, covered him, their black bores unwinking.

"Up with your hands, McKee!" ordered Myers.

BUCK'S fingers froze on his holstered guns. His eyes narrowed slits, he studied the pair. "How did you know I was here?"

"Call it a hunch," growled Myers.

Myers was lying. Buck knew that. Somebody had tipped Myers off. But who?

"Raise your hands," repeated Myers.

Buck debated momentarily. Could he draw his guns and shoot it out? Cold logic took possession of him. He might get one—but he couldn't get them both. He raised his hands slowly.

Myers said, "Light a lamp, Walker." He kicked the door shut behind him.

The match flickered; the wick caught flame. A ghost of a smile rimmed Myers' lips. His big, stern face was marked by dark shadows. Now Walker's gun, too, covered Buck.

"What'll we do with him, Boss?"

Myers spoke softly. "Robbery is a serious charge, Walker. But I don't think we'll ever let McKee get so far as to be tried in court. . . ."

"You can't try a dead man," said Walker.

Buck understood. They were going to murder him in cold blood. Well, before that happened, he'd have one of his guns, at least, and he'd take one of them over the ridge with him. He stalled for time.

"You can't get away with this, Myers."

"Why not?"

"Mike Swanson an' the ranchers, when they hear how I got killed, will ride into Cottonwood, an' take you an' your men apart."

"Yeah," scoffed Myers. "Well, my gunmen'll deal with them, McKee. I kinda wish they would go on the warpath against me. Give me an opportunity to get hold of their outfits sooner."

Walker cocked his gun. The noise beat against Buck's ears. The scene was cameo-clear. There was a moment of silence. Buck tensed, ready to go for his irons.

But he never drew. For a soft voice, laden with danger, came from the outside doorway.

"Drop those guns!" ordered Tortilla Joe.

THE Mexican stood wide-legged, his hogleg covering Myers and Walker. His gun was cocked. His finger rested on the hair-trigger.

"We can down him, Boss," said Walker. "There's two of us. . . ."

Myers' voice was cynical. "Yeah, we could kill the hellion. But take another look at him, Walker. See where that gun of his is pointin'? Right at my brisket! We *might* get him but he'd be *sure* to get me!"

Walker and Myers dropped their guns. Buck said, "*Gracias,* Tortilla," and picked up their guns. Buck covered them with their own weapons. "Get your bronc, Tortilla, an' drift!"

Tortilla Joe ran for his horse, picking up the can of doughnuts he had left outside. Buck waited until the Mexican had thundered down the alley. Then he backed out the door, wheeled and ran for his own horse. He caught his stirrup on the run and spurred after the hard-riding Mexican. Then his bronc, skidding around a corner, hid him from view.

Behind him, he heard men hollering, and he smiled. Twisting in the saddle, he tossed the guns of Walker and Myers into the doorway of a business house. Now his own irons were in his hands.

Riding hard, he caught up with Tortilla Joe, there on Cottonwood's outskirts. "They'll get their gang an' ride after us, Tortilla!"

Tortilla Joe's mouth was full of doughnuts. He held one out to Buck. "Want a cruller, Buck?"

AFTER Myers and Walker had left the Cabin, Lieutenant Henning asked Clem, the guard, if he could go outside and look at Redbird. Clem grudgingly agreed. He stood in the doorway, his rifle under his arm, while Henning went to Redbird and knelt beside him.

"How do you feel, Half Breed?"

Redbird essayed a weak smile. The front of his shirt was matted with blood. "My chest—she ees busted!" His breath came wheezingly.

The Army man studied the gaping wound. He shook his head. Redbird's eyes were the eyes of a doomed animal.

"You think—I die?"

Henning nodded wordlessly. The terror in Redbird's dark eyes was supplanted by anger. "You get my horse for me?"

Henning looked at Clem. "He wants his horse."

Clem debated. Then he said, "Okay, fella. He can't ride far in that shape. . . .We don't want him kickin' the bucket aroun' here. I'd have to bury him."

The horse stood a few yards away, its forefeet still tangled in the reins. Henning untangled him and led him back.

"You'll help me—in my saddle?"

Henning raised Redbird to his feet. The 'breed leaned against the horse, fighting nausea, fighting pain. His voice was a husky whisper.

"My *serape*—in my saddlebag. . . . Get it—wrap it aroun' me—stop the blood. Already I have lost—too much. . . ."

Henning took off Redbird's shirt. He wrapped the gaudy *serape* tightly around the 'breed's broken chest. Then he helped Redbird get the shirt back on. He almost lifted the man into his saddle.

"My ol' gun," said Redbird.

The .44 lay on the ground where Redbird had fallen. Henning said to the guard, "He wants his gun, Clem."

Clem came forward, rifle raised. "Don't touch that gun," he warned. He picked up the .44 and broke it. But Walker had already unloaded it. He handed it to Redbird.

"Where you going?" asked Henning.

"My brother—he lives in Sonora. Fourteen miles—across the—border. . . ."

"You can't ride that far."

"Si, Senor. Gracias. . . ."

Lieutenant Henning stood there and watched the horse and rider move slowly into the sunset. He watched until distances and the rough hills hid them from view. His throat was dry.

"Poor devil. . . ."

Clem said, "Better come inside, Henning."

Henning returned to the Cabin. He took his seat at the table and picked up his game of solitaire. Clem leaned back on his chair and studied the man.

"Some day, Clem, I'm makin' a break outa here."

"You'll have to kill me, Henning."

"I probably will," said Henning. "You got the makin's?"

Clem dug in his shirt-pocket, tossed the Durham to Henning. The Army man twisted a cigaret into shape, licked it and applied a match. His eyes were whimsical over the flame.

"You know, Clem, I kind of like you. I'd sort of hate to have to kill you, fella."

"That'd be too bad," agreed Clem.

They had bantered with words many times before. There was, between these two, a great respect. Henning admired Clem for his loyalty to his boss, Len Myers. And Clem admired Henning because the Army man could look at death and smile and never lose his confidence.

Henning knew that, soon, he would have to make a break for freedom. He had not signed the government papers that commissioned him to purchase the Wolf Ridge basin; he would never sign them with Len Myers.

He had seen Len Myers shoot down Redbird in cold blood. And he knew that, sometime soon, Myers would do the same to him.

CHAPTER VIII

Round-Up

WHEN Buck and Tortilla Joe were a mile out of Cottonwood, the Myers men swung in on their trail, fifteen men pushing horseflesh with hard spurs. Myers headed his gunmen, with Jeb Walker riding at his flank.

"Hit for the rough country," said Buck. "We can lose them back there in the canyons!"

Tortilla Joe glanced back at the Myers gunmen. He rode twisted in saddle, and his .45 bucked flame twice. But the distance was too great; his lead fell short. He holstered his gun and crammed a doughnut into his mouth.

"Man, if Win Ling's tortillas are as good as his doughnuts, I'm goin' marry that China boy. Want another, Buck?"

Buck pushed a doughnut into his mouth. He pulled his Winchester from its saddle-holster. Leaning forward on one stirrup, he took a quick aim, and let his hammer drop.

Behind them a horse piled up suddenly, throwing his rider. Overhead, a rifle bullet buzzed like a mad hornet. Buck grinned, shot again—and another horse went down. He levered a fresh cartridge into his barrel.

"Stopped two of them, Tortilla."

They pounded up a draw, spurred over a piny hill, and slid down into a gully. There was a trail running along the bottom. They galloped up this for some two hundred yards, then ducked into a side-canyon.

They rode up the side-canyon, put their mounts up a steep ridge and, hidden by the brush, sat and watched the Myers men ride past, almost half a mile away.

"Tricked them," grunted Buck.

Tortilla Joe threw the doughnut can into the brush. "Empty," he said disgustedly. "Well, let's mosey back to the Long S, Buck. Those men'll have an all-night ride after nothin' if they figure they can catch us."

THE LONG S ranch was dark when they rode in at midnight. The ranchers had sent their women home with the rigs and the children. They were bedded down around the corrals and in the bunk-house. A guard challenged them at the edge of the yard. Satisfied as to their identity, he let them ride in.

Mike Swanson was saddling his horse in the barn. Tortilla Joe and Buck rode into the barn and dismounted.

"Where you goin', Mike?" asked Buck.

"Was headin' into Cottonwood. Figured mebbe you two had got into somethin' an' needed my help. Any luck?"

Buck told him what had happened. Mike's brows rose. "Now how would Myers know you intended to rob his office?"

"That," said Buck, "is what I'd like to know. Are all the ranchers here?"

"Smithers and Johnson aren't here. Johnson had to take his missus home. Said he'd be back come daylight. Don't know what became of Smithers. Reckon he musta went home, too."

"Maybe one of them rode ahead an' warned Myers."

"But nobody—except me an' you—knew what you aimed to do, Buck."

"That's right," admitted Buck.

Tortilla Joe yawned. "Me, I am sleepy, no? We better grab some shut-eye, Buck. Tomorrow she weel be a busy day, *amigo*."

Mike had two extra bedrolls. Buck and Tortilla Joe rolled them out, pulled off their boots, and hit the hay. Soon Tortilla Joe was snoring loudly.

But there was no sleep for Buck. Johnson rode in an hour later—a thin, stoop-shouldered man with an honest, open face.

"Where you been?" asked Buck.

"Took the woman an' the kids home. Then saddled a bronc an' rode back. Why ask, McKee?"

"No offense," murmured Buck.

Another hour passed. Then Smithers rode in, his bronc covered with dry sweat. The horse had been ridden hard.

"Have a hard ride?" asked Buck.

Smithers said, "Been over to my place. Quite a distance, McKee. We pullin' a wagon out come mornin'?"

"Sure are."

"Goin' be a hard job gettin' them broomtails outa that rough country. I doubt if we can do it."

"We can try," said Buck.

SMITHERS went into the bunkhouse. Buck slipped into a sound sleep despite Tortilla Joe's raucous snores. He was up at sunrise. Win Ling had hotcakes and coffee ready; the ranchers ate hurriedly and went to work.

Win Ling had the mess-wagon packed with chuck. He and Tortilla Joe carried out the cooking utensils. The remuda consisted of about forty head of saddle-horses.

The horses were poor. Yet, Buck knew, they were tough—they were native stock, small of hoofs, used to the rocks and brush of the badlands.

"Goin' be short on saddle-broncs," Buck told Mike.

"Some of the horses back in the rough country are escaped saddle-horses," said Mike. "We can take the edge off'n them when we catch them an' make circle horses outa them."

"Yeah," said Johnson. "If we can catch them!"

Jean rode a pinto. She wore a buckskin riding-skirt and a beaded buckskin vest. Her hat was a small beaver Stetson with a chin-strap.

"Where you goin'?" asked Mike.

"I'm ridin' with you men," she said.

"Nope."

"Why not? I can do a man's work. You need somebody to jingle horses and ride day-herd."

"Those broncs are wild," said Mike. "They'd run over a man on foot or on horseback when you've got 'em in a herd. You better stay here!"

"I'm not!"

Mike looked at Buck. "What'd you say, Buck?"

Buck smiled. "Looks like the lady's got her mind made up, Mike. An' a woman's like a locoed steer—you can never turn 'em."

"Okay," said Mike. "But be careful."

Jean looked at Buck. "*Gracias.*"

"Don't thank me," said Buck. "You might fall off one of those cliffs an' break your neck."

"It's my neck!"

The mess-wagon tarp had a hole in it. They patched that. Win Ling loaded his Dutch ovens. Two of the ranchers greased the wheels on the mess-wagon and the bed-wagon. Then the teams were hooked to the rigs. Win Ling handled the ribbons on the mess-wagon. A rancher took the lines on the bed-wagon.

"Let 'em roll," said Buck.

Win Ling screamed shrilly and his team hit the collars. The horses were skittish and wanted to run, but the Oriental held them with a tight grip. The bed-wagon swung into line.

They could not move the wagons into the badlands because of the rough terrain. Therefore, they would make camp on the edge of the rough country. They would hold their herd there, too.

Mike Swanson was elected wagon-boss.

"Johnson, you an' Hank ride circle together." He paired the men together. "We might run into trouble. Good thing to ride in pairs. Tortilla Joe an' Buck don't know this country. Therefore it might be a good idea if they rode with a local man."

"Suits me," said Buck. "How about me an' you ridin' circle together, Smithers?"

Smithers said, "Suits me." He spoke slowly.

"The wagons'll stop on Alkali flats," said Mike "There's only one way to round up these wild broomtails. Circle aroun' them an' head them toward camp. Run 'em into a bunch on the level ground. Then hold them by herd-riders."

TORTILLA JOE rode off with a skinny cowman. Buck and Smithers headed back into the rough country. The sun was blistering hot. Heat waves danced in an undulating manner over the scrubpine and dwarf oaks.

They rode the high ridges, hazing the wild ones out of the brush. This was fast, hard-riding work—dangerous work. A bronc had only to slip

on a ledge and horse and rider would plunge off a cutbank. Should a horse stumble on the dead run over a boulder, he'd go end over end.

The catclaw was thick; its scraggly claws ripped at horse and rider. Buck was riding a hammer-headed gray. A tough horse, a good horse. He had put a heavy leather breast-shield on the bronc. That way, the catclaw could not rip his shoulders.

Now and then, they scared wild horses from the brush. Long-maned, long-tailed mares with colts. Native three-year-old unbranded studs. Some were escaped saddle-horses. They wheeled and ran, neighing and stomping.

There was no use trying to keep on their tails. The only thing the circle-riders could do was to head them down canyons that led to the level country below. There, they would converge together, and make a herd.

Buck had deliberately picked Smithers as a circle-companion.

Once, from a high butte, Buck saw Tortilla Joe and his partner riding across the heat-filled distance. Smithers was working a ridge below Buck. The rancher scared up four head of horses. They circled him and headed back toward the border. Smithers could have headed them off, but he did not. Buck frowned.

They worked in toward camp. By sunset, horses were moving down onto the lowlands. All together, they had gathered about thirty head. Old mares, fillies, spring colts, sleek yearlings.

Now the hard riding began. The wild horses, sensing they were moving into a trap, started to bolt back into the hills. Riders rode them hard, heading them off.

This was gruelling work. Tough on jaded broncs, tough on tired men. Buck rode his stirrups, flicking the loose end of his lasso rope to turn the horses. Even at that, some of the broncs broke through.

SUNSET found them holding about twenty-five head. And of these twenty-five, only about eight head would be acceptable for cavalry horses. It took almost every man in camp to hold the herd.

Two men would eat while the others held the horses. Jean was helping Win Ling. Buck and Smithers rode into the chuck-wagon just as Tortilla Joe and his companion had finished chow and were heading back to the herd.

The Mexican's face was grimy with sweat and dust. His bronc was leg-weary. "Well," he said, "we got some."

"Yeah," replied Buck, "but not enough."

Buck ate hurriedly. The boiled beef and spuds tasted good. He was tired, but there was no rest. Nor would there be any until the herd was in Army hands. He rode back to the herd.

He built a loop in his catch rope, and tied the free end hard-and-fast to his saddlehorn. He rode close to the herd, saw a bay gelding that showed the marks of a saddle. His loop snaked out.

The noose settled around the bay's neck. Buck jerked the slack loose, then settled to one stirrup. The bay hit the rope. He threw himself. Buck dismounted and ran down the rope, pulling his hogging strings from his belt. Before the bay could struggle Buck had tied his front feet together.

Tortilla Joe rode up. He had a hackamore in his hand. He fitted the hackamore around the bay's head. Buck let the bay up. The bronc stood with hobbled feet, trembling.

Buck stripped the saddle from his horse, and saddled the bay. Tortilla Joe blindfolded the beast with his *serape*. Buck slowly climbed into saddle, lowering his weight on the bay.

Tortilla took off the hogging-string. Buck braced himself, hackamore rope in his right hand.

"Okay," he said softly.

Tortilla Joe ripped off the blindfold. The bay stood still momentarily, muscles bunched. Then he started to buck.

Buck rode deep in the saddle, his hooks in the bay's shoulders. The beast uncorked, and did his best. But

there was no daylight between Buck and the kak. The horse bucked for fifty yards, then broke into a run.

Buck pulled his head around, and straightened him out. The bay, his steam gone, acted like a good horse. Buck trotted him back into camp.

"He'll be soft for a circle or two," said Buck to Win Ling. "But he'll harden up pronto."

The Oriental grinned. "If he don't, we make meat out of him." He made a pass suggestively with his butcher knife.

"How we standin' with grub?"

Win Ling shook his head. "Need some tomorrow, Buck. All outa flour now."

CHAPTER IX

Gunsmoke

REDBIRD DID not ride into Sonora. The first few miles convinced him that he was physically unable to ride such a distance. He was weak and darkness rimmed the edge of his brain. He fought it back by sheer mental strength.

Redbird knew that soon, unless he obtained medical care, he would die here in the badlands. And when he died, his hatred for Len Myers would die also; that thought sent strength into him.

He could never ride the distance in to Doc Halverson at Cottonwood. Nor could he reach his brother in Sonora.

The Long S ranch was only eight miles away. He thought that he would ride into the Long S and tell Buck McKee about the Cabin. Then Buck, armed with this evidence, could lead the ranchers to the Cabin, and free Henning. Myers' game would be up.

But then Buck—not Redbird—would gun it out with Len Myers. And, deep in the half-breed's heart, burned a strong flame demanding that he himself revenge his own honor. No, he would not ride to the Long S.

Where would he go?

He thought of Manuel Martinez, then. Martinez, an old Mexican, ran goats five miles away, just north of the border. The stoop-shouldered old man would cure his wounds. He was a man widely known for his use of herbs and his primitive medical skill.

Redbird rode in that direction.

Now the blood had congealed on his *serape;* his danger of bleeding to death was gone. But nausea, created by shock, set in. He trembled so violently he had to tie his reins around the horn because he could not hold them.

His horse had been over this trail many times. The beast plodded forward, without guidance. Redbird lost all track of time.

Now the shock passed, and fever set in. Stubbornly, Redbird clung to his saddle, his runty body stooped. His eyes were dim with pain.

Thirty minutes later, he rode down into the gully. Manuel Martinez' frame shack stood in the clearing ahead. The place was dark. A hound dog, its tail tucked between its legs, barked at him. A small goat, penned in the old barn, bleated plaintively.

Redbird's horse stopped in front of the door. Slowly, Redbird slipped to the ground. The hound licked his hand.

"Go 'way, dog."

The hound slunk behind the house. Redbird entered. The place was dark. "Manuel," he called.

There was no answer. Redbird leaned against the wall, and tried to think. Manuel had probably ranged far with his goats that day. Soon he would be back.

Redbird did not have strength enough to light the candle standing on the homemade table. He tottered over to the filthy bunk and lay down. All strength left him then and he went into a dark, unbroken sleep.

* * *

AFTER Tortilla Joe and Buck McKee ditched Len Myers and his riders there in the rough country, Myers called his gunmen in and rode back to Cottonwood. They were a silent, morose group.

Once back in the Bootstrap Saloon, Myers and Walker went to the back

room, where Walker sank into a chair, his heavy legs extended.

"Well," he said, "what's next, Boss?"

Myers strode across the floor, his bootheels pounding. "We could go into the county seat an' swear out a warrant chargin' McKee with robbery."

"Why not do that?"

Myers shook his heavy head. "No dice, Walker. The sheriff might start snoopin' aroun' into some of our activities."

"He wouldn't dare."

"Why not?"

"You're a big man in this country, Myers. You're a big taxpayer an' business man."

Myers said shortly, "A federal charge is a tough offense, Walker. If Henning breaks loose an' tells the Army officials we kidnapped him—well, I'm not that big. You can't buck the old man with the whiskers an' whip him."

Walker studied his boots. "We'll have to kill Henning, an' see that he don't escape. We gotta get him outa the way, Len."

"We'll get him outa circulation."

"When?"

"He might sign that paper," said Myers. "I'll give him another three days or so." He studied Walker from under lidded eyes. "Who's runnin' this spread—me or you?"

"You are," Walker said softly. "But I got my hand in it too, Len. I was with you when you kidnapped Henning before he rode into town. My neck would go into that noose, too; they make them all sizes, you know."

"We'll get Henning."

"What about McKee an' this Spic pard of his?"

"McKee'll leave himself open—sooner or later. Then we nail him. We gotta get him outa our way."

Walker asked, "How about a bullet in his back?"

"An' have this basin flare up in a bloody war? No, Walker. Later, maybe, but not now. I'm playin' it close to my chest, fella. We'll wait a few days. Those ranchers might get—"

A knock sounded at the door. Myers' hand was on his gun. He said, "Come in." A lanky gunman entered.

Myers asked, "What'd you want, Jack?"

"I jus' rode in from the Long S. Was watchin' the spread from the rimrock like you ordered. The ranchers are fixin' to round up some wild horses, Len. Sell' em to the cavalry."

"Okay," said Myers.

The gunman left. Walker's eyes were lidded slightly. "So that's their game. . . They might do it, too."

"They'll never get enough horses." "Those broncs'll sell for fifty bucks a head. To raise eight thousan' dollars they'd have to sell over a hundred an' fifty head. An' they'll never be able to corral that many inside less than a week."

"I hope you're right," said Walker.

Myers halted, studied his henchman. "You think you could run this better than me? Never forget I'm the boss here, Walker. I'll give you your time an' you can ride over the hill!"

"I'm in this too deep, Len."

"Then keep your mouth closed!" snapped Myers.

ALL THAT night, there on his bunk, Lieutenant Henning had lain awake, building his plans of escape. Morning found him in a deadly dangerous mood. He was up at daybreak. An hour later, a Myers gunman rode in, leading a packhorse.

"Some grub, Clem," he told the guard. He leered at Henning. "How's Fancy Pants likin' the climate?"

"He's lonesome for Boston," said Clem cynically.

The two renegades unloaded the pack-horse. They carried tin cans and bacon into the cabin and dumped them on the table. Henning watched worldlessly. He was cold and strong inside.

"I'll take over your job," said the gunman. "See you tomorrow mornin'."

"*Adios,* Charlie."

Clem mounted Charlie's horse and rode toward Cottonwood, leading the pack-horse. The guards in the brush had been changed, too. They rode

with Clem down the slope. There were five of them.

Time dragged on. The sun rose higher and flies buzzed through the hot air. Henning went back to his game of solitaire. But his mind was not on the cards. His mind was busy trying to build a plan of escape.

Charlie sat on a chair, his back braced against the wall, his rifle leaning beside him. Henning covertly studied the man, and then, he had his plan.

"I'm hungry," he said.

Charlie told him, "There's some canned goods an' some bacon. There's kindlin' in the wood box. There's the stove. Get the skillet an' mix up somethin'. You're not tied down, fella."

Henning got to his feet and crossed the room to the cookstove. He crammed an old newspaper into the firebox, placed some kindling on it, and touched a match to it. The fire caught and crackled.

Henning lifted the heavy skillet gingerly. Should he turn and heave it at the renegade? He quickly discarded that plan. It was too risky. Charlie could grab the rifle and shoot if the skillet missed him.

Suddenly Henning saw his out. He had to pass in front of the guard to get to the table. The guard sat on two legs of his chair as he tilted it back against the wall. Henning decided to pull the chair out from under the guard, and then dive for the rifle.

He started across the room to the table. When he passed the guard, his left boot lashed out, jerking the chair ahead. Charlie crashed to the floor. Then he grabbed for the rifle.

Now Henning had hold of the rifle, too. They struggled for the weapon, their strength locked. The guard's wheezing breath sounded in Henning's ears. They fought wordlessly.

Desperation fired strength into Henning's arms. Slowly, he bent the guard around, crushing him by sheer strength. They fell to the floor, rolling, threshing, cursing. Charlie brought up his right knee hard into Henning's belly.

Pain surged through Henning. Once again, the knee came in, knocking his breath from him. Desperately, Henning fought, knowing he was bested. Then the rifle broke at the stock.

The crash of the splintering wood ran through the thin air. Henning had the gun's barrel. The heavy steel made a short arc. Henning missed the guard's head. The barrel crashed down on Charlie's shoulder, knocking him to the floor again. Charlie reached for his holstered gun, but he had lost his .45 in the scuffle.

Henning grabbed the .45, and turned. Now a man stood in the doorway, his rifle raised. One of the guards in the brush had heard the commotion.

With sinking heart, Henning knew he had lost. He had a gun, but the guard could kill him. Henning eared back the .45's hammer. But he never fired; neither did the guard in the door.

For, unnoticed, Charlie had staggered to the table. He grabbed a can of beans, and threw it at Henning. The heavy missile hit the cavalryman behind the ear, and Henning dropped like a heart-shot deer.

CHAPTER X

Horse Herd

MARIA DROVE her buggy into the Long S round-up camp the next morning. Tortilla Joe was riding herd with Buck. The Mexican took one look at the fat *senora*.

"She is after me," he said.

Buck grinned. "She likes you, huh?"

Tortilla Joe mopped his forehead with his serape. "That woman, she ees crazy. But she cannot catch me; she ees too fat for to ride the horse. *Gracias a Dios* for that!"

"I'm goin' in to breakfast," said Buck.

Tortilla Joe sighed. "I do not dare go to the wagon," he declared.

"You goin' to starve to death?"

"You bring me out some grub, no?"

"Carry ham an' eggs in my hat?" asked Buck. "Nope, Tortilla. You're not in a hotel now. You might jus' as

well ride in an' grab the devil by his horns."

"Her horns," corrected Tortilla Joe.

Mike Swanson was arguing with Maria when they rode in. "You ain't got no reason for hangin' around the round-up camp," he was saying. "We got one woman with us now, an' that's enough trouble. Turn that team aroun' toward the ranch again."

"No, *Senor!*"

Three of the ranchers, sitting cross-legged by the mess wagon, were grinning widely. Maria's eyes lighted up when she saw Tortilla Joe.

"Oh, *mio amigo,*" she cried. "You want me close to you, no?"

"No."

Maria's eyes hardened. "Jus' for that, I stay." She lowered her enormous bulk out of the buggy and waddled over to the mess-wagon. Buck dismounted, got a tin plate, and filled it with mush.

"Any meat, Win Ling?"

"No meat, Buck. All out."

"Have to rustle some meat," said Buck.

"No flour either, Missy Buck. No able to make biscuits, either. No coffee. All out."

"We'll get some," promised Buck.

The three ranchers, their breakfast over with, threw their tin plates into the dishpan, where Jean was washing the tinware. Maria looked at Tortilla Joe, who still sat on his horse.

"You can get down," she said. "I won't hurt you."

Buck grinned. "You can't eat mush on horseback, Tortilla."

Tortilla Joe dismounted. He took his mush and hunkered beside Buck. Maria waddled over to where Jean was washing dishes. "Give me a dish-towel," she said abruptly. She wiped the tinware so hard it looked as if she had a grudge against it. And she was mumbling under her breath.

THE RANCHERS caught their circle-horses. None of the men had slept more than an hour or two and they were red-eyed. Their whisker-stubble was coated with alkali dust. Smithers rode up to Buck.

"Me an' you ridin' circle together, McKee?"

"Not today, Smithers. You ride with Tortilla Joe's partner. Me an' Tortilla got a little ridin' of our own to do."

"Where you goin'?"

"That," said Buck, "is our business."

Buck's tone was cold. Smithers' face hardened. Then he turned his horse and rode toward the rough country. Buck watched him go.

"There's one of the most inquisitive men I've ever met, Tortilla."

"Maybe he ees what you call a newspaper reporter, no?" Tortilla Joe grinned through his mush.

"He may be a reporter, but he sure don't work for a newspaper."

Jean and Win Ling mounted and rode out to hold the herd with one of the nester's kids, a boy of fourteen. The herd had quieted down somewhat but it was still pretty boogery.

The remuda was still in the rope corral. Buck and Tortilla Joe roped fresh horses.

"Where we goin', Buck?"

"Into town," said Buck. "We're gettin' some groceries." He threw a pack saddle on another bronc, then swung into the saddle.

"But we have no money," complained Tortilla Joe. "None of us have any money. And it takes dinero to buy chuck."

"There's only one general store in Cottonwood, Tortilla; Len Myers owns it. And we don't need money to buy groceries there. Savvy?"

"We rob the store?"

"You think fast."

"Then," said Tortilla Joe, "we ride fast, no?"

* * *

THEY RODE down the alley behind the store, a low frame building. They left their horses there and entered the back door. Buck led the way through the rear room, which was stacked with sacks of flour, ground feed, and grain. He picked up a sack of flour.

"You stay here, Tortilla."

Buck carried the fifty-pound sack to the pack-horse. He stuffed it in one of the canvas bags tied to the pack-saddle. Then he went back to Tortilla Joe. They had all the flour they needed for a while.

"Now for the rest of the grub," said Buck.

They went to the door that led into the main part of the store. Two counters lined each wall. Bolts of cloth and canned goods lined the shelves behind the counters. The clerk did not see them. Neither did the housewife who was buying some ginghan at the front of the store.

"Wait'll the woman leaves," murmured Buck.

The woman paid for her purchases and left. Now Buck and Tortilla Joe moved forward. The clerk saw them.

"That back door open?" he asked.

"Musta been," said Buck. "We came in that way."

"Guess Casey musta left it open when he unloaded that flour this mornin'. I better close it. Don't like to leave it open because the kids sneak in an' steal stuff."

"Don't close it," said Buck.

His tone was soft, yet it held hardness. The clerk detected this and stopped and stared at him. His voice was awed.

"You're Buck McKee," he said. "I saw you yesterday when you took Toby Nickels—What'd you want, McKee?"

"Grub. An' plenty of it!"

'For the Crystal Lake ranchers?"

"You guessed it."

The clerk shook his head. "Against orders, McKee. Len Myers won't let me sell anythin' to the ranchers."

"You're not sellin' them anythin'," assured Buck. He pulled his guns. The menial stared at the Colts, his face going pale.

"You mean.—?"

"That's it, fella. Put your hands up. Get back against the wall. No, don't look at that rifle! Be good, an' you won't be hurt!"

"Len Myers'll—"

Buck spoke to Tortilla Joe. "Grab that sack, Tortilla. Get some coffee an' all the fixin's. Get a slab or two of that sowbelly in the showcase. That's mighty good chewin'."

"*Si,* Buck."

TORTILLA JOE worked swiftly. He had the sack almost full when the Myers gunman entered the front door. He took in the significance of the drama in one glance. And his hands streaked for his guns.

Buck's bullet hit him in the shoulder. The blow drove the gunman back out of the door. He tripped on his spurs, and fell sitting down on the sidewalk.

"Holdup!" he hollered.

The clerk ran for his rifle. Tortilla Joe threw a coffee can at him. The can hit the clerk and knocked him down. Tortilla Joe's gun-barrel rose, descended. The clerk lay still.

"Out the back door!" ordered Buck.

But the alarm was out. Already Myers' gunmen were on the street. They were in the alley, too. Buck looked out the door. A bullet beat into the casing beside him.

"Our horses have stampeded," grunted Buck. "They're prob'ly hightailin' outa town. They'll run into the brush along the creek an' stop."

"What'll we do?"

"We can't go out the front. We'll walk into their lead. We can't go out the back, either. Only way we can go is up."

"*Up?*" Tortilla Joe's brown face showed amazement. "You gone *loco,* Buck? Me, I have no weengs! I am no angel—yet!"

A rifle bullet whistled overhead. A Myers man was across the street, firing in through the open door. Buck planted four bullets into the opposite building. The rifle ceased speaking.

Reloading his guns, Buck ran into the back room. Tortilla Joe followed, carrying the filled sack. Buck ran his eyes across the ceiling. There was a glass skylight above him. But how would they get up to it?

"There's a ladder," said Tortilla Joe. "In the corner, Buck!"

They jammed the ladder upright, breaking out the skylight. Shards of glass tinkled on the floor. Tortilla Joe climbed first, sack over his shoulder, and Buck followed, gun out.

They were on a flat roof. The Myers' gunmen did not see them because of the building's falsefront and high sides. They halted momentarily, studying the alley below them.

The alley was silent. But Buck knew that Myers' men waited behind sheds and out-buildings for them to step from the store. Buck jerked Tortilla Joe's serape loose.

"What you do with my serape?"

"Start a fire. Light it an' drop it down through the skylight. This place is dry an' it'll burn like tinder."

"But my serape, it will burn! An' two dollars I deed pay for eet in Nogales the time—"

"You can get another," said Buck.

BUCK touched a match to the serape and dropped it through the broken skylight. The burning scarf landed on a pile of sacks. Soon the sacks were on fire, their flames eating up the dry walls of the store.

"The clerk," said Tortilla Joe. "He weel burn!"

"Why don't you use your eyes?" grunted Buck. "Didn't you jus' see the clerk stagger outa the front door!"

Smoke was pouring through the skylight. Buck and Tortilla Joe waited no longer. The bank, a 'dobe building, was next door. They climbed over onto the bank's roof.

Harsh voices sounded in the street. "The store's on fire," yelled a man. "Now we got them two hellions trapped, hombres! That smoke an' fire'll drive 'em into the open!"

"We got them!"

Buck recognized Myers' voice. He smiled tightly. The store was doomed, but he doubted if the 'dobe bank would burn. The walls were too thick and you couldn't burn 'dobe.

Traveling along the top of the buildings, they went unnoticed to the end of the street. The last building was somewhat lower than the others. Buck and Tortilla Joe dropped to the ground.

Momentarily they crouched against the building, eyeing the street. But that section was deserted. The whole town was watching the fire.

"Okay," grunted Buck.

They ran into the diamond-willows flanking Cottonwood Creek. They found their broncs and the packhorse grazing along the stream. Tortilla Joe hurriedly loaded the sack on the pack-horse.

"My shoulder, she ees tired."

Screened by the brush, they rode out of Cottonwood unnoticed. A mile out, they rode openly onto the trail. From there, they could see the burning store. Flames and sparks were crackling high.

Buck chuckled. "They'll think we burned up in the fire, Tortilla."

"Next time Myers sees us, he theenk we are ghosts!" Tortilla Joe's heavy face fell. "But my serape, she ees gone. . . . "

"Maybe Maria'll buy you another," Buck comforted him.

"Bosh!" cried Tortilla Joe. "Never again mention her name when I am present—never, *Senor* Buck!"

CHAPTER XI

Night Ride

AFTER THE store had burned down, Myers and Walker met in Myers' office. Walker's heavy face bore a wide smile.

"Well, we got rid of them two hellions, Len."

Myers grinned widely. "We sure did, Jeb. Killed two birds with one stone, you might say."

"I don't follow you."

"A year ago I insured the store to the hilt. Took every cent of insurance on it I could get. Notice how I was lettin' the stock run down? Now these two come along an' saved me some trouble."

"Oh. . . ." murmured Walker.

Len Myers beat the desk with his fist. "Yeah, I sure cleaned up today, Jeb. Got rid of Buck McKee an' Tortilla Joe an' made a coupla thousan' iron men. With McKee an' that Spic outa the way, I'm set to go, fella."

"Yeah, but—"

"No buts about it, Walker. I got the ranchers whipped. When this week ends I'll buy their lands back from the tax assessor for a few cents

on the dollar. I'm peddlin' it to the gover'ment at a big profit. Then I'm dustin' outa the states into Mexico."

"These wild horses—"

"They'll never gather enough wild stuff to pay their tax bills. They can never corral—" There came a knocking at the back door. "Come in!"

Smithers entered.

"Anybody see you ride into town?" asked Myers, frowning.

"Nobody, Len."

"You're takin' a big chance," mumbled Myers. "Somebody see you an' tell the ranchers about you comin' in here an' the ranchers'd gut-shoot you, man."

"Don't worry about me."

"I'm not worryin' about you, fella. You can lose your head if you want to, an' get killed. It's me I'm thinkin' about. 'Cause if they notch you off, I won't have a spy ridin' with the ranchers."

"What's on your mind?" asked Walker.

"The ranchers are gatherin' the wild stuff," said Smithers. "We had a good day's gather today. Dang it, Len, they've got almost forty head of cavalry stock, an' they'll get more. Buck McKee sure had a good idea when he said they oughta gather those wild uns."

"He'll never get another idea," Myers said.

Smithers studied him. "Why not?"

"DID YOU notice that my store has been burned down? Well, Tortilla Joe an' Buck McKee was caught robbin' the store. They burned in the fire."

"Maybe my eyes are bad," said Smithers. "'Cause I jus' seen two riders headin' out for the round-up camp. They were Tortilla Joe an' Buck McKee!"

Walker's jaw fell open. Myers stared at the rancher. "You're crazy!"

"They was out by Bankhead Springs. I was hidin' in the rimrock watchin' them. They had a pack-horse loaded with chuck!"

Walker said hollowly, "Now how—?"

Myers cut in. "I got it, men! They went out on the roof an' made their escape! Dang it, Walker, you're to blame for that! You pulled all our men in aroun' the burnin' buildin'!"

"But who'd figure—"

Myers whirled on Smithers. His face was a study in conflicting emotions. "So the ranchers are gatherin' wild stuff, huh? Well, them wild broncs are plenty hard to hold on a dark night. Easy to stampede, ain't they?"

"They are," admitted Smithers.

"About how many head will you hold tomorrow night?"

"We're ridin' the Landry Hill section," said Smithers. "That's easy country to work. The stock ain't so wild. I'd say about seventy head—mebbe eighty. Why?"

"We're stampedin' them. Tomorrow night. Now get out of here, both of you. Make tracks!"

* * *

BUCK AND Tortilla Joe reached the round-up camp at dusk. Already over a hundred and fifty head of wild horses were held there on the flat country. Win Ling smiled and nodded his head.

"Gloceries, heh?"

Tortilla Joe and Win Ling unloaded the pack-horse. The Oriental smiled and nodded happily. "Len Myers, he get plenty mad when you take his gloceries, heh? He fly up, heh?"

"Burned him up," muttered Tortilla Joe. The Mexican had one eye out for Maria, who sat under the shade of the mess-wagon.

"For this," said Win Ling, "I make you some tortillas."

Maria got to her feet and waddled toward them. Tortilla Joe stepped into saddle and rode out to the herd. Maria stopped and stared at his retreating back, her arms akimbo.

"He no like you, Missy," said Win Ling.

"Close your mouth!"

The circle riders were coming in, hazing their catch ahead of them. The first horse gathered had settled down to grazing and the herd was quieter. Still, it was plenty spooky.

Jean's pretty face showed fatigue.

She had been doing a man's job in the saddle.

"You better catch a little sleep," said Buck. "We'll have to double our night guard tonight."

"I'll make it okay, Buck."

Mike Swanson rode up on a big gray. He did not go on the circle rides because of his bum shoulder. The shoulder, he told Buck, was hurting bad. His face was lined with fatigue.

"Better watch that shoulder," said Buck.

"Don't hurt as much as it did yesterday."

The dusk was heavy now. Buck looked over the ranchers assembled at the mess wagon where Win Ling was ladling out the chuck. He noticed Smithers was absent, and asked Mike where the man was.

"Still out on circle, I reckon."

Smithers rode into camp an hour later. His horse was leg-weary and begrimed with sweat.

"Where you been?" asked Buck.

"Ridin' the Piny Ridge country. Man, those hosses are sure wild over there! Tried to turn 'em toward camp, but it was no dice."

Buck nodded. He turned in for a little sleep. Next thing he knew, Tortilla Joe was shaking him.

"Your night-guard, Buck."

Buck mumbled sleepily and pulled on his boots. He buckled on his star-rowel spurs. He had his night-horse picketed beyond the mess-wagon, and he saddled up and rode out to the herd.

THE wild horses had quieted down somewhat. Now some of them had bedded down while others grazed. There were a few bunch-quitters, though. Suddenly a bunch-quitter would dart from the herd and head for the brush.

Then a night-rider would spur out, and turn the horse back into the herd.

The ranchers had made no attempt to cut the herd. They had not turned back the mares and colts and yearlings. A big herd is easier to hold than a small one. Also, cutting the herd would have caused a lot of extra work and riled up the horses too much.

The moon was a golden disk riding through a cloudless sky. The wind was running through the trees high on the slopes. Three other riders were on night-guard. One of them was singing across the herd. Buck recognized the clear notes as belonging to Jean Swanson.

Smithers was on night-guard now, too. Buck had asked Mike Swanson to arrange Smithers' night-guard so he and Buck would be on shift together. Buck wanted to keep an eye on the rancher.

Somebody was getting information into Len Myers. Was Smithers the spy in the camp of the ranchers?

Buck decided to watch Smithers closely.

Jean Swanson waited for Buck to catch up with her. She rode a big bay with four white-stocking feet. Her hair was spun gold under the moonlight. Her eyes were deep pools.

"Waitin' for you, Buck."

She put her horse beside his. Buck rode slouched in his saddle, not unmindful of the pretty girl riding beside him. But beyond the ordinary male interest that every man feels for a pretty girl, he had no other thoughts toward Jean.

BUCK had met plenty of girls, good girls. Once or twice he had become serious with one of them. But the old wanderlust was bedded deeply within him. Even now it was storming the portals of his being. He wanted to settle this matter—and settle it speedily. Then he and Tortilla Joe would be riding on. Riding over the hills to see what lay in the valleys below.

And when a man got married—

But it was nice to have her riding with him. For there was a spot in Buck's heart—as there is in every man's—for a pretty girl with golden hair and blue eyes. Or, for that matter, a girl with brown hair and deep dark eyes.

But beyond that, Buck had no other thoughts. He was free as the prairie wind, and his movements

were his own. He owed not a dime in the world and he had no serious obligations. Not that he avoided responsibility. He liked tough jobs and he liked to conquer them. He admired men who settled in this wilderness and built giant cow outfits and hired dozens of riders. To these men, he took off his hat—but he had no desire to be one of them.

That Jean liked him was apparent in her manner, in her voice, in her eyes. And Buck, because he knew himself, had no desire to lend her any encouragement. He and Tortilla Joe, if the gods were good, would be riding out of the Wolf Ridge basin in a few days, and the thoughts of Len Myers and his cutthroat crew would be left in this land.

With Tortilla Joe, things were different. He was Latin, and his loves were short in duration. Buck thought of Maria and a smile came to his lips. Jean saw this smile.

"You're smiling, Buck."

"Just thinking," said Buck.

"Of what, may I ask?"

"Tortilla Joe an' Maria. First time I ever seen Tortilla run from a woman. That *senora* has him buffaloed, Jean."

Jean laughed.

BUCK dismissed these thoughts and let his mind dwell on Len Myers. Back of Len Myers' desire to own the Wolf Ridge basin lurked some ulterior motivation the nature of which was unknown to Buck, and Buck wished he knew what it was.

For days this doubt bothered him. Always it ran through his mind, dwelling on the edge of his thoughts, coloring them and adding spice to the struggle in which he was engaged. And some day soon, he knew, he would find the reason he sought. Then the problem would be clear, and he would be able to break Len Myers.

He had met men of Myers' mold before. And he knew that the only way to break Myers was to kill him. That, in itself, was brutal—but Myers, too, was brutal. There was only one way to deal with brutality. That was the deadly way of the pistol, the rifle. The way of violence and destruction. The way of death. . . .

He knew that he and Tortilla Joe were marked for death in Myers' book. They had crossed Myers, and whipped him.

No discomfiture, no fear, lurked in the thought. The land was young and strong, and youth demands struggle. Life belonged to those who fought and fought the hardest. To the man who fired first and shot the straightest.

The night-guard lasted two hours. Then four other ranchers, sleepy-eyed, rode out to relieve them. Buck and Jean rode into camp, where Buck unsaddled their horses and turned them over to the night hawk.

"Good night, Buck."

"Sleep well," said Buck.

CHAPTER XII

Border Camp

OLD MANUEL MARTINEZ had ranged far with his goats, for the range was poor even for a goat. He came into his yard late at night and corraled his animals. He was a stooped man, gray-haired; his face was marked with wisdom and patience. Redbird's gaunt horse was grazing beside the barn, still saddled.

"Que es?" the old goatherd asked himself. The *caballo* of my *amigo*, Redbird. But there ees no light in the house!"

The interior of the shack was dark. The flickering light of his match showed Redbird on the bunk. The sight of the blood soaking through his serape brought Martinez hurriedly to the bed.

"Redbird."

Redbird opened glazed eyes. "Ah, *amigo*," he murmured. "You have come. . . ." He closed his eyes.

Martinez touched the match to a home-made candle stuck in the mouth of a whiskey bottle. He placed it on the rickety chair beside the bed and slowly unwrapped the serape. The wound lay bare and ugly.

"Who did this to you, *amigo?*"

"Myers."

Martinez crossed himself reverently. "No good did it do you to ride with Myers and his killers. Many times have I warned you that only death awaited them at their journey's end, and that the same death would be yours. Why did he shoot you, *amigo?*"

Speaking slowly, Redbird told him. His eyes were pleading. "You can save my life, no?"

"I can do only what *Dios*, the almighty, allows me to accomplish. Through my poor old hands and my study of herbs, may commission me to restore you back to health."

"There is hate in me, Martinez. Even now the fire of it keeps me from dyin'. With your skill, and my hate, I will live, *amigo.*"

"Hate directed to who?"

"Toward Len Myers, *amigo.* Someday I will kill Myers. . . ."

THE GOATHERD shook his gray head sadly. "Always men live with hate eating their insides. Never can men learn that hate is destructive and useless. They call me a simple-minded fool because I live with my goats and love, and his ways." He got to his feet. "Now, if you will let your muscles be free, I can work better and faster. . . ."

The old man worked for two hours. He got cold water from the pump, and his hands were bloody. The light of the candle danced and shimmered upon the dull wall. Redbird lay silent and unconscious under the probing fingers.

Now the wound lay clean and bare. Now the heated knife was moving into the incision. Now Redbird moved in his merciful sleep. Now the dull bullet lay in the gnarled, wrinkled palm.

"Be kind, Oh Father. . . ."

Then came medicines and disinfectants. Crude healing measures handed from generation to generation, tested by chance and long use. And always the candlelight dancing on the wall.

Then came the bandages—clean and white, torn from a strong white sheet. Odd it seemed, indeed, that this stooped man, aged and lined with the story of his harsh life upon his face, should possess such clean material.

Redbird murmured, "The wound, she ees better now, *amigo.* Yet will I ride out to kill the man who shot me. . . ."

"It will be days yet, *amigo.*"

"Those days shall drag by with slow feet," murmured Redbird.

All night the old goatherd sat beside the bunk. When daylight again came, Redbird was sleeping peacefully. The goats were bleating in their pens and Martinez freed them to wander as they would. That afternoon Redbird's eyes opened again. They were clear now.

"I am hungry, *amigo.*"

The liquid was warm and put new energy in his body. Redbird sucked it in noisily. He felt strength flow through him, and he knew then he would live. He lay back on his pillow and slept.

When dusk came Martinez went to gather his goats. They had wandered far and the band had split up, but the old Mexican gathered them with a great patience. He did not sleep much that night. Every hour or so he would be up to see how his patient was resting.

Redbird sat up the next day.

"You will get well," said Martinez.

The old man went out with his goats. When he returned at sundown Red bird was sleeping. His rifle and his six shooter lay on the bed beside him. Martinez picked up the rifle without disturbing the sleeping man. He broke the breech and saw that the rifle was loaded now. He laid it silently down.

Red bird had walked to the corner, got his rifle and six shooter. Then he had taken shells from the shelf and loaded the weapons.

Two days later, Redbird was able to walk.

WHEN Lieutenant Henning came to, he lay on the bunk. He opened his eyes, then closed them as pain shot through his head. He remembered then what had happened. He had tried to escape.

He lay with his eyes closed, gathering his thoughts. The dismal thought that he had failed ran through him and brought a sense of

regret. When he opened his eyes again, he saw Clem standing in the doorway.

"What happened?"

Clem said, "You tried to make a getaway."

"I know that," said Henning. "Who hit me an' with what?"

"Charlie threw a can of beans at you. Hit you behind the ear so hard that it almost flattened the can. You got a tough skull, soldier. Otherwise you'd be dead now."

"How long have I been out?"

"Overnight. You sure didn't do Charlie any good, either. You dang near sent him to the hospital, you might say."

Henning got to his feet. His knees were wobbly and he sat down on the bed. He held his head between his hands, and gave his thoughts free play.

He had failed. That thought, loud and persistent, pounded at his brain. Now the guards would watch him more closely. A second attempted break for freedom would be difficult to accomplish.

Hopelessness tugged at him momentarily. Perhaps he should sign that paper with Len Myers. Then he could get back to Tucson and tell his commanding officer he had been forced to sign it by coercion. He might stand trial in military court for his failure to do his duty.

But that plan, he knew, was no good. Myers held the key to the whole problem. Myers would never let him ride away from the cabin. Myers could not afford to turn him loose. He knew too much. Myers would kill him in the end, anyway.

He would have to escape.

His mind, trained in deductive thinking, sought about for another avenue of escape, but found none. Yet he knew that, sooner or later, another opportunity would present itself.

A GUARD entered. "There's riders down ridin' the lower country, Clem. The ranchers are workin' the country below the Cabin."

Clem frowned. "I don't like that," he admitted. "'Course, they're still ten miles or so from the Cabin. If they move back this direction, an' see somebody's holin' out in the Cabin, they're liable to get suspicious an' we'll have a fight on our hands."

"They won't work back this way, Clem. Country's so rough, an' there ain't no feed—the wild hosses never range back this far. No need for them to work this country. Nothin' to work."

"Don't light any fires," ordered Clem. "They might see the smoke. We eat everythin' cold until they move their wagon on. Wonderin' if they're gettin' any catch?"

"Got quite a herd down below. Seen a circle-rider haze a small bunch out of a gully. Was watchin' him through my glasses. Buck McKee an' that Spic friend of his'n were the riders."

"McKee's a dangerous man."

The other guard shook his head slowly. "I don't like the looks of this since McKee an' Tortilla Joe moved in. Fightin' the ranchers was bad enough, but them two are gunslingin' fools. An' then holdin' this soldier here jus' makes thing worse for us boys."

"In what way?"

"Ain't you got good brains, Clem? When we kidnapped him we crossed federal law. Bad enough to buck the local county an' territory law without crossin' the ol' gent with the long beard. We get caught in this an' it's time in the federal pen in Leavenworth."

"The border's just a few miles away."

"Yeah, but it might be too many miles." The guard spat. "Me, I don't like the way things are shapin' up, fella."

* * *

LEN MYERS was alone in his office when Jeb Walker entered. The saloonman was in an ugly, irritable mood. His face was bleak, hard.

"What's up, Len?"

"This," said Myers. "Came in the

mail this mornin'." He tossed Walker the letter. Walker read:

United States Army,
Cavalry Unit No. 34,
Tucson, Arizona.
August 2, 1898.

Len Myers,
Cottonwood, Arizona.
Dear Mr. Myers:

Lieutenant William G. Henning was dispatched upon July 25 last to go to Cottonwood and purchase the Wolf Ridge basin from you. To date, this office has had no reply from Lieutenant Henning regarding the progress of his mission.

Has Lieutenant Henning contacted your office and, if so, what arrangements were made that the Army might possess the Wolf Ridge basin?

Sincerely yours,
Maj.-Gen. A. L. Shirley.

"What're you goin' do?" asked Walker.

"Only one thing to do," said Myers. "Get Handsome Joe to forge Henning's signature on that bill of sale. Then I'll mail it and a letter to Tucson saying Henning bought the land and started back for Tucson."

"But he'd take the bill of sale with him."

"That's right," said Myers. "I got it, Jeb. We'll say that Henning, fearing the Injuns, wanted me to mail in the bill of sale."

"That oughta do it," said Walker. "Now what happens to Henning?"

"We gotta kill him!"

Walker nodded. "Reckon we have to pertect ourselves. All these letters are comin' through the mail, huh? You don't figger that the ol' postmaster might read the return address on 'em an' wonder jus' why the Army's writin' to you?"

"He ain't got that much sense." Myers paced the room with long steps. "Anyway, I tol' him I was fixin' to sell some cavalry horses to Uncle Sam. He prob'ly figures we are corresponding about the sale."

"Let's hope so."

Myers stopped, and grinned. "You sound worried, Walker."

"I don't like this setup, Len. That Army man may break loose—Wished he'da got killed when that guard hit him with that can of beans."

"You can't kill a man with a can of beans," said Myers. "We'll rub him out, fella. You got the boys all armed with plenty of shells?"

"Sure have."

"Good! We ride tonight, Jeb. An' when daylight comes that Long S herd'll be scattered between here an' Mexico."

"An some of us might be dead, Len."

"You only die once," said Len Myers.

"Where you keepin' these Army letters?"

"Over in my bank. Why?"

"Let Buck McKee get hold of one of those," said Walker, "an' our jig's up. You got 'em in the safe?"

Myers laughed. "McKee'd never dare rob that bank," he said.

CHAPTER XIII

Night Riders

THAT DAY the ranchers worked the Landry Hills. The terrain was not so rough there and the feed was better. Hidden springs back in the rough country fed the grass and thereby attracted the wild horses.

But still it was dangerous work, work that called for complete coordination between horse and rider. There was plenty of *chamiso* brush, buckbrush, and dwarf oaks. And many rocks that a horse could snag a hoof on and go end over end.

The crew was tired. Gaunt men rode weary horses. They were a bewhiskered, tough-looking crew. They always rode in pairs. Nobody knew when, or if, Len Myers and his gunhands would strike, but it was best to be prepared. Therefore the men always rode in pairs.

Buck and Smithers rode together. Never once did Buck let the lanky rancher get out of his range of vision. Smithers was surly. He said little,

and when he did speak he chopped his words.

They rode the high reaches. Beyond them to the south stretched the limitless wastelands of Sonora. The sun was a hot ball scorching the rangelands. A hot wind pushed in from the desert.

Buck reined up on a high hill and studied the rolling hills below. Wild horses were moving down gullies and coulees, dust hanging high behind their jarring hoofs. Below him a mare neighed to her colt. A wild stallion trumpeted and pranced as he urged his mares onward.

Tortilla Joe and Johnson were working the range to the east. Farther on were the puffs of dust raised by other wild horses and other riders. The white tops of the bed-wagon and mess-wagon shone like white jewels against the dark backdrop of the dry range.

The gather would be big today. The herd would be almost doubled. Yet Bucks forehead showed a deep frown.

Sooner or later, Len Myers would strike. The ranchers, in a few days, would have enough cavalry stock to pay off their taxes. Had the plan to gather the wild horses failed, Myers would not have bothered to move against the ranchers.

But the herd was growing with great strides. And, in its growth, Buck read danger. Myers would never allow the ranchers to pay their taxes. Therefore, he would try to keep them from selling their herd.

THE RIDERS did not go into camp at noon. They packed jerky beef and sandwiches in their saddle bags. Smithers and Buck ate their hurried lunch in the shade of an oak beside a small spring.

Neither man spoke.

Fifteen minutes later, they were in their saddles. Now the heat, bearing down heavily, made for slower riding. The horses were jaded. Sweat rimmed the headstall on Buck's mount.

The heat had taken the edges from the wild broncs, too. Usually they spent the hot part of the afternoon in the shade of the big oaks that bordered the springs. Now these lairs were unavailable to them.

The ranchers did not follow close behind the wild horses. To do that would have meant punishing their own saddle horses unmercifully. All they did was circle the wild ones and start them running toward the herd. When they turned and tried to break around and into the hills, other circle riders would turn them.

The riders worked in a great fan-shaped maneuver. Gradually they would close in on the horses. The horses, coming down canyons and gullies, would soon become a small herd. Then they would be driven to the bigger herd.

Although Buck kept an eye on Smithers all that day, he saw that the man made no suspicious movements. Buck wondered if he were wrong; he didn't like to think that the ranchers harbored a traitor. A traitor wouldn't last long in their camp if he were discovered.

They'd hang him.

The sun was sinking when Buck and Smithers rode into camp. They unsaddled their sweaty broncs and turned them over to the horse-jingler. They ate a hurried meal, sitting cross-legged under the bed-wagon. Then they roped fresh mounts from the rope-corral and saddled and rode out on guard.

Strange premonitions stirred Buck. He was tense, taut. The other ranchers were the same. They were tight-lipped, bleak. The strain was heavy. They had attempted the impossible and it was paying dividends. Another's day's gather, and they would have their horses. Then they would drive them to the county seat and sell them to the Army buyer there.

Myers would never allow that.

THEY DOUBLED their guard that night. Buck and Tortilla Joe and Mike Swanson met and agreed to ride guard all night. Mike Swanson's face was gaunt, unshaven. Tortilla Joe's heavy jowls were covered with black, wiry whiskers. Yet there was a smile on the Mexican's

thick lips and he always had a ready joke.

"Wish the women weren't here," said Buck.

Tortilla Joe spat tobacco juice. "That Maria, she ees make me seeck," he said. "Tonight, at chuck, she ees eat close to me. She ees after my scalp, no?"

"She don't want your scalp," said Mike; "she wants you."

"An' that," said Tortilla Joe firmly, "ees what she ees not goin' to get, *amigos!*"

Buck asked, "How's your arm, Mike?"

"Gettin' better. Not much pain now." Mike drew his six-shooter with his left hand. "Gettin' my draw down purty good."

"You might need it," said Buck.

Twilight settled into dusk. Then dusk lengthened into night. The first few hours were dark. Finally the moon heeled over the eastern ridges. Crickets chirped and a bullfrog croaked along the grass bordering the spring.

The moonlight was clear, so clear that Buck could read the lines in his palm. The horses had quieted down. Some of the mares and colts were lying down. A stallion pawed and snorted.

Midnight came. The moon was descending. Gradually, the tenseness left Buck. He became sleepy. He slouched in the saddle. But never for a single moment did he relax his vigilance.

Then the raiders came.

THEY loped out of the high brush, fifteen men riding fresh horses. Their guns were bucking flame across the startled herd. One moment the world was serene, quiet; the next moment it was drastic action, gunflame, and motion.

Mares reared to their feet, neighing for their colts. Stallions wheeled, ears pricked; then, terrified, they stampeded. The earth shook under their jarring hoofs. Dust rose in swirling, choking clouds.

Buck and Tortilla Joe were across the herd from the raiders. The horses were running directly toward them. Now the ranchers, sleeping under the wagons, came awake, and their rifles were blazing.

Buck saw Tortilla Joe spurring his horse ahead. Now Buck was bulling his way through the running herd, the dust almost choking him. He saw the flash of Tortilla's firing. Gun-roar rolled in crashing crescendo across the hills.

There was no stopping the herd. The only thing the ranchers could do would be to ride with the animals. One point was in their favor. The herd was stampeding toward the level country.

Had the herd turned into the hills, it would have been impossible to keep it bunched. The horses would have scattered to the four winds in that rocky wilderness.

Already all the ranchers were ahorse. Some of them were drifting with the herd, intent on saving as many horses as they could. And that, Buck realized, was a smart move. They were staging a running gunfight with the marauders. Buck laid hard on his spurs.

Now a rider swept by him, half hidden by the dust, and Buck recognized Jeb Walker. Buck's .45 spoke a hot challenge, but Walker was riding too fast, and Buck missed. Walker's gun spoke in reply.

Buck heard the brush of the bullet. His own gun kicked back, hard. But Walker was gone, and the dust hid him. Buck knew he had missed.

Rifles were flaming from under the wagons. He knew that Win Ling and Jean and Maria were attacking the raiders. A sudden tinge of pride pulled at him. They meant three more rifles in the fray.

Tortilla Joe was cutting through the herd, riding hard to intercept a Myers man. Buck saw another Myers rider swing in behind Tortilla. Buck spun his horse, and hit after the men.

He lifted his .45, and shot. The man, hearing Buck's bullet whistle overhead, turned his horse, his gun flaming lead at Buck. Buck twisted in stirrups, and shot twice. The riderless horse plunged on.

LEN MYERS' voice cried, "Okay, men! We got 'em scattered! Ride out, pronto! Make tracks!"

The voice came from behind Buck. He held his plunging horse, pivoting the beast. Ahead, Myers was riding hard, heading across the plain. Buck flung a shot at him.

But the distance was too far for a Colt. Buck holstered his pistol, and snaked his Winchester from the saddle-holster. He slapped the butt against his shoulder and tried to find his sights.

The moonlight and the dust made vision uncertain. One bullet kicked sod behind Myers' bronc. Then Myers, dipping into a gully, became lost from view.

His riders, their work accomplished, were fanning out, heading in the direction of Cottonwood. They were astraddle fresh horses, and the ranchers' broncs were tired.

There would be no percentage in following them. With sinking heart Buck knew that Len Myers had won this hand. The herd was scattered from hell to dinner. The horses would be wilder than ever now.

There was only one logical thing to do. That was to stick close to the herd and try to keep it from getting scattered. Buck laid home his hooks and rode through the dust.

Despite their efforts, the herd scattered. Terrified stallions led their mares into ravines, intent upon reaching the higher ground. The dust and the turmoil were thick.

The herd ran for ten miles. When the horses at last were halted, the ranchers held only a few head. The others had escaped. They circled them and headed them back toward camp. Buck and Tortilla Joe rode point. The Mexican's voice was heavy with fatigue and disappointment.

"Well, Buck, he ween that, no?"

"Reckon so," admitted Buck.

When they came into camp, Win Ling had dragged the dead men to the wagons. Two were Myers' gunmen and one was Johnson, the rancher. They gathered in a silent, awkward group.

"Be tough on Johnson's wife," murmured Smithers.

Jean said, "I'll ride to their place, Buck. It's easier for a woman to tell another woman. . . . "

Buck thanked her. He said, "There's a shovel in the mess-wagon. A couple of you men get it and bury these Myers gents. Anybody hurt?"

One man had a flesh wound in his forearm. Another had been jarred up when his horse had been shot.

"Got off lucky," said a short man.

"What'd are we goin' do?" demanded another.

All eyes turned to Mike Swanson. "What would you do, Buck?" asked Swanson.

"Ride like hell," said Buck, "an' gather 'em again."

CHAPTER XIV

Six-Gun Law

THE RANCHERS held a conference the next morning. They were a bitter, saturnine group of disgruntled men. With one blow, Len Myers had shattered their hopes of retaining their ranches, their holdings.

"We oughta head into Cottonwood," declared one. "Take up where Buck McKee an' Tortilla Joe left off an' burn down the Bootstrap an' the bank!"

Buck said softly, "Turn aroun' an' look at Mrs. Johnson, man."

Mrs. Johnson stood beside her buckboard. Tortilla Joe and another rancher were laying the dead body of her husband on the buckboard bed. The widow was weeping softly. Her oldest boy, a tyke of fourteen, sat on the buckboard seat, holding the reins. His eyes were red from crying. So were the eyes of his two kid brothers and his kid sister.

"What about her, McKee?"

"You've got a wife an' kids, fella. You ride into Cottonwood with a chip on your shoulder, an' your wife an' young uns'll be standin' over you jus' like Mrs. Johnson an' her kids are over Johnson."

"Then what'll we do, McKee?"

"Ride out an' gather more horses. When the time comes to strike at My-

ers an' his gunmen, we'll strike. But the time ain't ripe yet, fella."

"We ain't got but a few days left," mumbled a man. "Then if that tax money ain't in at the county seat, we're sunk."

Silence held the group momentarily. A rancher grumbled, "They ain't no use gathering more broomtails, McKee. When we do get a herd Myers'll scatter it from here to Sunday."

Buck's tone was sharp. "Listen, you men! You gather those broncs! I'm not leadin' you into a gunfight right now! There'll be a time for gunplay later. You'll prob'ly sniff plenty of powder-smoke before this set-to is over with. I'm askin' you one favor."

"An' that, McKee?"

"Tortilla Joe an' me came into the Wolf Ridge basin to help Mike Swanson. Mike an' me are good friends. I'm helpin' Mike climb outa the hole he's in. If you ranchers want to string along with Tortilla an' me, then hop to it. If you wanta play the game different than we do, you're sure welcome to it. I'll even attend your funerals. Are you stringin' with me—or ain't you?"

"Well said, McKee," said a rawboned rancher. "I'm puttin' my loop 'longside of yours, fella. You're the boss."

"Jess's right," said another. "Your word's good with me, McKee."

THEY went to their horses and rode out on circle. Mike Swanson frowned, and scratched his head thoughtfully. "Don't see through your plan, Buck," he admitted. "'Taint no use sendin' them men out ridin' circle. We get another herd an' Myers'll stampede it, sure as Hades. Jus' what's on your mind?"

Just then Smithers rode up. He said, "You ridin' circle with me today, McKee?"

"Be with you in a minute, Smithers."

Smithers heard what Buck said to Mike Swanson. Buck wanted him to hear it. "There's somethin' that stinks behin' this whole deal, Mike. The way I look at it, Myers has another reason for wanting the land aroun' Crystal Lake."

"But what is that reason?" asked Mike.

"I don't know," replied Buck. "But I aim to find out real pronto."

"How?"

"We raided the office back of the Bootstrap, an' found nothing. We burned down the store. That leaves only the bank left."

"You aim to rob the bank, then?"

"That's it, Mike. I didn't tell the ranchers that for fear they'd want to help me an' Tortilla Joe. That's why I sent them out on circle. Sure, there's no use ridin' circle, but it keeps them from gettin' into any trouble." Buck looked at Smithers. "Keep this under your hat, fella."

"I'll keep it to myself," said Smithers. "When do you intend to break into the bank, McKee?"

"Tonight, Smithers."

"Good idea," said Smithers.

Smithers rode over to the mess wagon and got a cup of Java. He squatted on his heels and listened to Buck.

"There's a safe in that bank," said Smithers. "How you goin' to crack it, McKee?"

"I'm not after the dinero in the bank," said Buck. "But there might be a paper or two that might tell us something. If we don't find that paper in the office, me an' Tortilla Joe are crackin' that safe."

"I'm goin' with you," declared Mike.

"Not with that bum hand, you ain't."

Mike's voice was husky. "Buck, I can't let you do that without me. It's my ranch you're fightin' for fella. You gotta let me side you!"

"Okay," said Buck. "You can hold our horses."

Smithers rode away. Tortilla Joe scratched his jaw and scowled. "Maybe you should not have told heem, Buck?"

"That's all right," said Buck.

"I do not know, *amigo*. . . ."

Mike Swanson rode out to the herd. Tortilla Joe and Buck mounted and rode toward the rough country.

"Keep close to me today," Buck told the Mexican. "When I wave my hat like this, you come a-hell a-fog-

gin' over to me. Drop everythin' an' come at a lope."

"What ees behin' all thees?"

"I figger Smithers is workin' with Myers. That being true, he'll be sure to get word to Myers that we are goin' crack the bank. I'll keep my eye on Smithers. If an' when he starts ridin' toward Cottonwood, I'll give you the signal, savvy?"

"*Si*, Buck."

BUCK and Smithers rode an outside circle. They clung to the timbered slopes, turning the wild horses to the north, where other riders picked them up. Buck recognized many of the broncs as those which had escaped the night before. They were not so wild. They were tired from their night run.

Never once did Buck let Smithers get out of his sight. Tortilla Joe, who was riding the lower hills, was always visible to Buck. Noon came and the afternoon lengthened out. Buck saw Smithers ride into a deep gully, and the rancher did not ride out again.

Buck waved his hat. Tortilla Joe waved back, and pointed his horse in Buck's direction.

"Where'd he go, Buck?"

Buck frowned. "I don't get it, Tortilla. He rode south instead of north. See him, way over yonder?"

Tortilla Joe studied Smithers through his field-glasses. "He weel ride down that canyon, Buck. Then he weel circle aroun' an' come into Cottonwood. That way, he weel be hidden by the hills."

"Smart," murmured Buck.

Buck and Tortilla Joe rode toward Cottonwood. They kept themselves hidden from Smithers, who rode to their east. They drew rein on the bluff above the cowtown, and reintied their broncs in a clump of brush. They hunkered on their bootheels, studying the somnolent town below through their field-glasses.

Cottonwood slept under a blazing sun. A few horses switched flies at various hitchracks. Only an occasional man or woman moved across the plank sidewalks. The town was taking its *siesta*.

Time ticked by. Tortilla Joe dozed in the shade, his heavy head resting on his chest. Buck chewed a twig and watched the town. Smithers rode into town in about thirty minutes. Buck poked Tortilla Joe in the ribs. The Mexican came wide awake.

"There he ees, Buck."

"I can see," growled Buck. He focused his glasses. The town stood out clearly. He could even see a cur, sleeping in the shade, twitch his hind leg when the flies pestered him.

Smithers rode into an old frame barn. He came out on foot, and went down the alley behind the Bootstrap. He halted for a long moment, hidden by a building. Then he moved across the alley and boldly entered Myers' office. Buck cursed under his breath as he lowered his glasses.

"The dirty mutt, Tortilla. Time him with your Ingersoll an' see how long he is in there."

Smithers was in the office for twenty minutes. Moving unseen through out-buildings, he went to his horse. He rode out of Cottonwood the same way as he had come—circling the hills so he would not be seen by the ranchers.

BUCK got a-foot, tugging up his sagging gunbelts. He spoke tightly. "Well, here go the fireworks, Tortilla."

"*Si*, Buck."

They hit across country at a hard lope, pushing their broncs swiftly through the hanging heat. They followed no trail. They dipped down coulees and climbed steep banks.

Now they came to a break in the hills. Sharp walls dotted with clumps of *chamiso* brush hemmed them in. Here ran a dusty trail. Buck knelt beside it.

"He hasn't come back yet, Tortilla. Here's the tracks he made when he rode toward town."

"We wait," said the Mexican.

They sat their horses in an oak clump. Buck rolled a cigarette and Tortilla Joe chewed tobacco. Neither had much appetite for the grisly task ahead. But Smithers was a traitor, and all traitors had to die.

Buck pondered on the ways of men.

How any man could sink so low as to betray his fellow men was beyond his reasoning. Had he and Tortilla Joe and Mike Swanson ridden into Cottonwood to rob the bank that night, they would have blundered into an ambush staged by Len Myers. Len Myers, who had been tipped off by Smithers. Smithers therefore would have been responsible for their deaths. . . .

"Here he comes," murmured Tortilla Joe.

Now hoofs drummed beyond the hill. Buck spoke quickly. "You stay here, Tortilla. Lemme handle this."

"But, Buck—"

Buck said softly, "*Gracias, amigo.*"

Buck rode forward, halting his horse across the trail. Smithers rounded the corner, riding high on his stirrups. When he saw Buck he dragged his mount to a dust-boiling stop.

"What're you doin' here, McKee?"

"I could ask you the same," countered Buck.

"Broke my off-latigo strap," said Smithers. "Thought I'd duck into town an' get a new one, seein' I was so close to Cottonwood." He studied Buck levelly. He was a cool fellow. "An' you?"

"Len Myers don't sell latigoes," said Buck.

Smithers' eyes were narrowed points. "What're you talkin' about fella?"

"I was up on the butte watchin' you through my glasses. I saw you go into Myers' office. You're a dirty dog, Smithers! You tol' him we intended to rob the bank tonight!"

Smithers' hands were on his guns. He had twisted his bridle reins around his saddlehorn. His lips were a fine line slashing his narrow face. His words came slowly.

"You know too much, McKee. An' because you do, you have to die!" And then Smithers' guns were rearing from their holsters.

SMITHERS was fast, cat-fast. Already his guns were clearing his holsters. Buck knew he could never draw his guns in time. For Smithers, by his unexpected draw, had gained the edge.

Buck never drew his gun. He laid down on the handle, and shot through the open holstertip. He was pressed for time and his bullet went low. His lead slammed into Smithers' belly.

The shocking blow drove Smithers' lead wild. Buck heard the scream of a bullet overhead. Dust spouted at his horse's hoofs. Buck shot again, and missed.

Smithers' horse, terrified by gunfire, leaped to one side, spilling Smithers on the ground. The rancher lost his guns in the fall. Buck dismounted and stood beside the man Tortilla Joe rode out of the brush.

Pain etched Smithers' gaunt face. He said jerkily, "You've—killed me—McKee—"

Buck said nothing. Tortilla Joe, too, was silent. A cow bawled on a distant hill. Smithers' breathing was loud.

"My guts—"

Then Smithers died.

CHAPTER XV

Riders of Death

THEY LOADED Smithers across his saddle and rode into Cottonwood.

Buck said, "You ride aroun' through that alley, Tortilla. Cover me when I get in front of the Bootstrap. . . ."

"*Si*, Buck. Good luck. . . ."

A few townspeople stood on the sidewalks, staring at Buck and the horse bearing Smithers' body. Buck drew rein in front of the Bootstrap.

"Myers," he called.

Len Myers came outside, halted wide-legged on the sidewalk. Jeb Walker stood beside him, his thumbs hooked in his broad gunbelts.

"Here's your man," said Buck. "I killed him. . . ."

"My man!" said Myers. "What're you talkin' about, McKee? He's a rancher, an' no rancher—"

Buck's words were sharp. "You can cut that short, Myers. I seen Smithers sneak into your office. I was layin' out on the rimrock

watchin' him through my glasses. So he told you we intended to rob your bank tonight, huh?"

"You'll never rob it, McKee."

Buck smiled. "Maybe I never intended to rob it? Maybe I jus' said that to see what Smithers would do? Smithers walked into my trap, Myers." Buck tossed the reins of Smithers horse to Myers. "There he is, fella."

Myers did not grab the reins. "What am I goin' to do with him?"

"Bury him," grunted Buck. "He died because he was hooked up with you. You mean to tell me you're such a dirty dog you wouldn't even stan' the funeral expenses of one of your own men?"

Jeb Walker pushed forward. His hands rested on his guns. The other Myers gunmen were watching closely. They were a tough lot.

Walker said, "That makes two men you've killed in the last coupla days, McKee. They tell me you're handy with your cutters."

"You talk big," said Buck softly. "That's because you got Myers' gunmen behin' you backin' you up. Walker."

Walker's knuckles were white against his black gun-handles. Buck's hands rested on his saddle-fork. Walker knew he would beat Buck to the draw. That thought beat against his blood. Walker's elbows jerked back—

BUT WALKER never drew. For Tortilla Joe, squatting unnoticed between two buildings across the street, let his rifle bark out once. The bullet ripped through the slack in Walker's sleeve, then thudded into the Bootstrap. Walker thought at first Buck had beat him to the draw. He stared at Buck, his face pale. He drew his hands from his guns.

"Who the—?"

"The Mexican," said Myers. "He's across the street, by the hardware store."

Tortilla Joe said clearly, "I am keelin' the first hombre that pulls a gun against Buck." He was a dark shadow against the building.

Now Buck's guns were palmed. "Up with your hands!" he ordered.

Walker stared into Buck's guns. Slowly his hands went upward. Myers' face was hot and angry, but the saloonman raised his hands. They stood in a tight, awkward group, their hands raised.

Buck holstered one gun. Leaving Smithers' horse there, he wheeled and rode out of Cottonwood, twisted in the saddle, his .45 covering Myers and his men.

Now the corner of a building hid him from view. He heard rifle-fire crackle behind him, and he smiled. Tortilla Joe was driving the Myers' gunmen into the Bootstrap, preparatory to making his getaway. The gunfire ceased.

Soon Tortilla Joe came loping up, his face grim. "Hit the trail, Buck," he grunted.

They rode high on stirrups, thundering toward the hills. No pursuit formed behind them, though. Buck scowled deeply. It didn't seem logical that Myers' gunmen would not pursue them.

"By the time they got to their horses," grunted Tortilla, "we would be in the hills, no?"

"Reckon they figure there's no use hightailing after us," said Buck, smiling. "You see that look on Myers' face?"

"He sure was mad, Buck."

* * *

AFTER Buck and Tortilla Joe pulled out of Cottonwood, Jeb Walker was all for trying to run them down. But Myers silenced his hireling with harsh words.

"Our horses are in the barn, Walker. We might have had a chance to run them down if'n we'da had our broncs all saddled an' ready. But by the time we got saddled they'd be miles outa town. . . . "

"But, Boss—"

"Come into the office," said Myers.

The rest of the gunmen went back to their various games—pool, seven-up, and poker. Walker closed the door behind him.

"What'll we do, Len?"

"We don't have to do nothin', Jeb We got the ranchers whipped. We

cleaned them out when we stampeded their herd last night. In three days I'll own the Wolf Ridge basin."

"Think they'll rob the bank?"

"I dunno, Jeb. But we better station some guards." Myers' boots pounded hard on the cottonwood floor. "Then again, it might be just a stall. Now what good would it do them to rob the bank?"

"They could get them Army letters. They could get some cash."

Myers laughed throatily. "Those letters are locked in the safe, Walker. So is all the cash. An' neither of them men can open that safe. Have Hank guard the back entrance tonight. Me, I don't figure they'll try to rob the bank. Buck McKee jus' tol' Smithers that to get Smithers to walk into his trap."

"McKee's smart, Len."

"Not too smart."

Walker rolled a cigarette. "I wonder what become of Redbird?"

"Prob'ly dead some place, Jeb. An' if he ain't, he's prob'ly dyin'. Why keep harpin' about that 'breed? He's outa the way."

"If he sees McKee—"

"He won't see McKee. Redbird rode south in Mexico."

"What're we goin' to do with Henning?"

Myers lips pursed. He scowled. "Tomorrow we ride out to the Cabin. When we ride back, Henning'll be dead."

Walker tapped his holstered guns. "Now you're talkin', Len. Get him outa the way an' the Army h'ain't got a thing on us." His eyes narrowed. "But I wish I knew if McKee did aim to rob the bank—"

"Can that music," growled Myers. "He can't bust that safe if he does. But post Hank at guard."

"Okay, Len."

* * *

BUCK and Tortilla Joe reached the round-up camp at dusk. They told the ranchers about Smithers. Mumbled anger swept across the group. Harsh voices rose in anger against the dead man. Buck lifted his hand for silence.

"No use cussin' the dead, men; that's bad luck. He paid for his sneakery. The fight is still goin' on—we still have to whip Myers."

The ranchers went over to the mess-wagon for chow. Buck and Mike Swanson squatted beside the rope corral. Tortilla Joe shot an inquiring glance over the outfit.

"Where ees Maria's buggy? She ees gone, no?"

"She an' Jean went back to the ranch," said Mike. "Guess they figured you boys wasn't payin' enough attention to them."

Tortilla Joe sighed happily. "That ees good, Mike. Now what ees on your mind, *Senor* Buck?"

"We're ridin' into Cottonwood come dark. We're robbin' the bank. We'll never raise enough money to pay taxes by roundin' up these broncs. We'll pay them taxes with Myers' own money—dinero stolen from his bank!"

Mike Swanson scowled. "But he'll have guards up, Buck. Especially since Smithers told him you aimed to rob the joint. Why not wait until tomorrow night or the next night?"

"Time's runnin' short, Mike. No, I figured different about that bank. Of course, he might have a guard or two posted. But I still think he figures that I was kiddin' Smithers in order to make Smithers show his hand. Fact is, I think tonight would be the best time to hit."

"But who'll open the safe?" asked Mike. "We ain't got no dynamite. We can't blow it apart."

Buck smiled. "You tell him, Tortilla."

Tortilla Joe's homely face bore a happy smile. He held out his stubby fingers. "See them hands, *amigo* Mike? Them feengers, they can open any safe." He tapped his right ear. "Them ears, they can hear—oh, so well. The leetle tumblers in the dial, they go *clink, clink*. Suddenly they go *plunk, plunk*. Then eet ees time to turn the dial the other way, no?"

"Where'd you learn safe-crackin'?"

"Many theengs, they have happened to me," said Tortilla Joe mysteriously.

"You danged Mexican!" Mike gave

Tortilla Joe a hard push. Tortilla Joe sat down in the dust, smiling. "Okay, you two hellions. Shall we tell the other ranchers, Buck?"

"Nope. Just the three of us." Buck's voice was low. "Too many cooks spoil the son-of-a-gun-in-a-sack. Rope your top horses. The three of us go out on nightherd together. At midnight we meet by the big oaks an' head in for Cottonwood. An' *Dios* help the man who stands in our way. . . . "

Tortilla Joe crossed himself. *"El Senor* will ride with us," he declared.

CHAPTER XVI

Camp of Death

REDBIRD was a small man, but he was tough. Thin, wiry, his body held great endurance, great recuperative qualities. Then, too, the hate inside burned like a consuming flame.

Now that his fear of death had passed, another fear possessed him. This was that Buck McKee or some rancher would kill Len Myers. And then he, Redbird, would not be Myers' slayer.

His mind demanded action, but his wounded body could not comply. Patiently he controlled his impatience. He made himself master of his emotions. He shut the thought of Len Myers from his mind as much as he could, and he concentrated upon regaining his strength, his health.

Old Martinez took good care of him. He could request no task too menial or too large for the old man to accomplish. Then came the day when Redbird could walk without becoming too faint.

"Tomorrow," he said, "I will ride away, old Manuel."

"With hate in your heart you shall not ride far."

"I cannot live with hate," said Redbird. "Either I must kill this hate, or it will kill me. You have bullets that fit my guns. You shall sell me some, old man."

"No, my son. They are not for sale. But they will be yours for a gift. But remember to ride easy in saddle. For if your *caballo* should stumble and fall, your wound would be broken open."

Redbird felt of the wound. The incision had not healed completely. He knew old Martinez was right. The wound could be broken open easily. He glanced at his bloody serape hanging on the wall. But the serape was not bloody now.

"You washed my serape?"

"Si, amigo. Last night, when you slept. Now it is clean again. You take it with you, no?"

Redbird shook his head. "No, *amigo mio.* To you I geeve thees serape—as a gift, hombre. Always when you look at eet theenk of me, Redbird, the lost man. Remember me then, *amigo.*"

"You owe a great debt to a man," said Manuel Martinez. "That you owe to the hombre who tied that serape around your broken body. For if it had not been for him, you would have bled to death."

"Si, I owe him my life. For heem, I weel fight to my death. He shall be rewarded, *amigo.* Now go, for I need sleep if I ride at daybreak. . . . "

NEXT morning, at daybreak, Redbird slowly climbed into saddle and turned his horse toward the north, riding at a slow walk. Manuel Martinez crossed himself, the golden sunrise shimmering on his snowy hair.

"Vaya con Dios, amigo mio. . . . "

Redbird's plans were not clear in his head. Some inner voice demanded that he ride into Cottonwood and challenge Len Myers and kill him. Cold logic told him that, though he might kill Myers, Myers' gunmen would kill him before he could escape. That was all right with Redbird. As long as he killed Myers, he was willing to die.

And if he failed to kill Myers?

Then he, Redbird, would be killed. Either way, he figured he would soon be dead. And, in the back of his head, another thought kept pestering him. Henning was being held prisoner in the Cabin. Sooner or later—if he had not already done so—Len Myers would kill Henning.

Only one man in Redbird's life had

ever stepped from his path to help him—that man was Henning. Now Henning was in danger. Redbird balanced his problem in his mind.

Out of the mass of detail, one purpose stood clear. He would rescue Henning from the Cabin immediately. He would rescue the Army man before he rode into Cottonwood to challenge Len Myers.

Redbird turned his horse toward the Cabin. The beast pulled eagerly at the reins, but Redbird held him firmly. Once the bronc stumbled over a rock. A tongue of flame spat its length across Redbird's chest. The 'breed's breath came in a short gasp. Then the pain passed as suddenly as it had come.

The mid-forenoon sun was warm when he drew rein in the thick brush back of the Cabin. His approach, he knew, had been unnoticed. He knew this country well; he knew Indian tricks of deception.

He dismounted in a clump of buckbrush and studied the Cabin, about a hundred yards ahead. His knees were trembling. Cold sweat lined his forehead. He felt weak and gaunt. For the first time he really realized his physical weakness. He needed to rest for the arduous task ahead.

He tied his bronc to a tree. Then he drew a strand of long mane-hairs out of the cayuse's mane. These he tied around the bronc's jaws. The horse could not neigh now.

Redbird lay on the ground. Sleep came quickly. He awoke with a start at dusk. He felt revived, and his knees were steady. Martinez had packed jerky beef in his saddle-bags.

He hunkered, chewing the jerky. The meat was salty. He drank deeply from his canteen. He waited for dusk to change into night.

FINALLY it was dark. No lights showed in the Cabin. According to old Martinez, the Crystal Lake ranchers were rounding up wild horses in this district. Had there been a light in the Cabin, the ranchers would have seen it—and ridden in for curiosity to see who was living in the old outlaw post.

The Myers men probably tied Henning up each night, thereby keeping him from sneaking out of the dark Cabin.

His gun in hand, Redbird sidled up to the Cabin. He flattened against the frame building, listening to the voices inside. Lieutenant Henning and Clem were talking.

"Damn," said Henning, "I wish we could have a light."

"Jus' forgit about a light, Army man."

"I miss my solitaire game."

Clem did not answer. Redbird huddled against the building, trying to think up a plan for action. He was at the Cabin's rear. Only one window—a window without a pane—was in that wall.

Redbird scratched on the dry wall with his six-shooter, and then waited. He knew the sound could be heard inside.

Finally Henning said, "What was that, Clem?"

"Dunno," muttered Clem.

Redbird scratched again.

"There it goes again," said Henning.

"Prob'ly a blue-jay," replied Clem. "Them danged jays'd drive a man crazy the way they beg for food."

"But the jays land on top of the house, not on its side."

"That's right," said Clem. "Then what the heck—?" Clem stuck his head out the window.

He did not see Redbird. Redbird's gun came down hard. The heavy barrel smashed in the back of Clem's skull. Clem grunted softly and slid back into the Cabin. Redbird heard him fall on the floor inside. He heard Henning gasp.

"Who's—what happened?"

"This is Redbird, Henning."

"Redbird? Man, you lived—"

Redbird cut in. "The front clear?"

"They got me tied up," said Henning. "The door is closed."

Redbird slid around the corner, and halted beside the door. The other guards were evidently hiding out in the brush. He opened the door and slipped inside, his knife in hand. The place was pitch dark.

"This way," murmured Henning.

The Army man was tied to a chair.

Quickly Redbird cut his bonds loose. Then he knelt beside Clem. Clem was dead.

"Let's get outa here, Henning."

Now they were outside, moving around the Cabin. The darkness hid their escape. Soon there would be a moon. But by then they would be some distance away.

"My horse—over this way. We ride him double."

REDBIRD'S knees were shaky. Pain lanced through his chest. He leaned against his horse, his lips compressed. Henning helped him into the saddle. Then the Army man climbed up behind the runty half-breed.

Henning handled the reins. He had to hold the 'breed into the saddle. He sent the horse at a walk, taking care that the cayuse made as little noise as possible.

"Where we goin'?" asked Redbird.

"Get me to the Long S round-up camp. I want to see Buck McKee an' Mike Swanson; tell them that the Army wants to buy the Wolf Ridge basin. Then I'll tend to Len Myers and his killers."

Redbird nodded his satisfaction. It fitted in with his plans perfectly. But, according to his figuring, Henning was wrong in one point. For Len Myers would be dead by the time Henning got the Army into Cottonwood. . . .

"I take reins now," he said.

Redbird put the bronc into a long lope. The horse stumbled, and the 'breed pulled him back to a walk. The ground was dotted with boulders, and the night was dark. They would reach the round-up camp about two o'clock in the morning, Redbird guessed. They might have reached it sooner, but he could not afford to ride any faster. . . .

He would kill Len Myers.

CHAPTER XVII

Bank Robbery!

BUCK AND Tortilla Joe and Mike Swanson rode into Cottonwood without speaking. They had stopped at a rancher's place and got a heavy fence-bar and a wire-stretcher.

Cottonwood was sleeping under the moon. They tied their horses in a shed about half a block from the bank. Buck took his catch-rope from his saddle. They hunkered in the shadows, and studied the bank.

The building sat on the corner. The front door opened out on Main Street. The rear door opened on the alley. The windows were barred. A feeble kerosene light flickered inside. A nightlight. . . .

"Let's do some scoutin'," said Buck. "Tortilla, you go down the alley. See if you can spot anybody aroun' the back of the bank. I'll take the front. Mike, stay here. We'll be back pronto."

Buck moved across Main Street. He went down an alley, then came in between two buildings, opposite the bank. He stood there for some time, watching the bank. No guard. He went back to the alley, went to the other end of the street, circled around and entered the alley that ran behind the bank. Tortilla Joe met him there.

"No guard out in front," said Buck.

"There ees one in the alley, Buck. Even now he ees hunkered up against a building back of the bank."

The guard sat on his heels against a shed.

"We can not shoot heem, Buck. The bullet, she would make too much noise, no? And the whole town would hear heem!"

"You stay here, Tortilla."

Buck moved forward, catch-rope in hand. The shed was low. Working silently, he climbed upon it. The guard was below him. Buck built a loop in the rope. But the edge of the roof ran out and hid the guard below.

The roof was covered with tar-paper. Buck rolled some tar-paper in a hard ball, and tossed it against the opposite building. It made a snappy sound. The guard came alive.

"What the—?"

Buck heard him move forward. Now he could see him. He was a heavy-shouldered man wearing a ten-

gallon Stetson. His back was toward Buck. Buck flipped the loop out.

But the loop was too small. It settled around the man's hat, slapped against the brim, and slid off his shoulder. The startled man wheeled, reaching for his holstered gun.

BUCK could have shot him. But the shot would have awakened the town. Buck launched himself forward. He dived from the roof. He crashed into the man just as the fellow's guns were leaving leather.

The man grunted. Buck's diving impact sent him crashing to the ground. Buck's gun-barrel rose. The moonlight glistened on it. The gun-barrel descended, then rose again. This time the moon did not reflect on it. The gun-barrel was red with blood, and the guard was limp.

Buck was wiping his gun on the guard's shirt when Tortilla Joe appeared. "You think anybody heard the ruckus?" asked Buck.

"Eet didn't make much noise, Buck. Now what she ees next?"

"Go back to Mike. Move the broncs up closer. We might have to make a quick getaway. Leave Mike with the horses. Robbin' a bank is a serious offense. We don't want Mike to get involved in the actual robbery. Bring back that wire-stretcher an' fence bar."

Tortilla Joe melted into the night. Buck leaned against the bank's back door, his eyes probing the moonlight. No alien movements met his eyes. No alarming sounds came to his ears. Cottonwood slept.

When the Mexican returned, Buck had bound the guard with his own gunbelts, gagged him and blindfolded him. He rolled the fellow back into the shadows. The guard would be out for some time.

Buck could see Mike and the horses. Mike held the creatures beside a shed a few yards away. Buck took the fence-bar. The end of the bar was pointed and flat. He jammed it hard between the door and casing.

The heavy bar crashed through wood and sheet-steel. Using it as a lever, Buck tried to jimmy the door. Tortilla Joe threw his weight against the bar. The bar bent and wood creaked, but the door did not open.

"Lemme get another bite, Tortilla."

Again the fence-bar sank through steel and wood. Again they laid their weights against it. Again wood creaked but the door remained closed.

"Try the window," said Buck.

Tortilla Joe hooked one end of the wire-stretcher to two bars in the window. He hooked the other end to the heavy hitchrack behind the bank. He and Buck pulled on the rope. The ropes tightened. The window bars pulled harder.

"She ees give a leetle, Buck."

"Try again, Tortilla."

THE HITCH-RACK groaned under the strain. The window bars strained creakingly. Once again they tightened the wire-stretcher. Buck knew that one of three things would have to give: the wire-stretcher, the bars, or the hitchrack. He figured the hitchrack would go first. He was mistaken.

Suddenly the bars broke loose. The wire-stretcher fell s l a c k. Buck lengthened it out again and Tortilla Joe hooked it to two more bars. These came easier. Soon they had all the bars loose.

Using sheer strength, they bent them upright. A slight irritation pulled at Buck. He had not expected the bank would be that hard to crack. He had expected to open the door with the fence-bar.

"We gotta break the window, Tortilla. That'll make quite a bit of noise. You can't raise it. It's fastened down."

Buck slapped the glass with his six-gun. Shards of glass tinkled as they hit the floor inside. That sound died and Buck keened the night for other sounds. But evidently nobody had heard.

He kicked one boot over the sill, and stepped into the bank. He jerked the night-latch from the door, flung it open wide. Tortilla Joe entered.

"Let's get to work, Tortilla."

A kerosene lamp, its wick low, stood on a table. The flickering yellow rays showed the safe dial clearly. Tortilla Joe fell to his knees and

went to work. His stubby fingers turned the dial slowly. One ear was glued against the knob listening to the tumblers inside.

"Goin' be a tough one, Tortilla?"

The Mexican grinned. "She ees been a long time since I have cracked a safe, no? An' my fingers, they are steef. We should open safes more often, *Senor* Buck. Then I would always be een practice. . . ."

I'll watch the front," murmured Buck.

ONE eye on the front door, Buck rummaged through a desk, glancing at the correspondence. Many times he opened letters and studied them beside the lamp. But they were only business correspondence.

"How you comin', Tortilla?"

Sweat glistened on the Mexican's brow. His eyes were sharp pools. He passed his hand slowly over his forehead.

"She ees tough one, Buck. A tough nut to crack. But I theenk I get heem een a leetle while. . . ."

Buck went back to the desk. He was tense. He froze suddenly, his eyes narrowed. Tortilla Joe, there at the safe, had heard the same sound, too. He stared at Buck.

"What was that?"

Buck heard the sound again. Then he saw the rat. He was a big fellow with wicked eyes. He sat in the corner beside his hole, staring unwinkingly at them. Buck balled up some paper and threw it at him. The rat slid soundlessly through his hole in the floor. Tortilla Joe went back to work.

"She ees open, Buck."

"Where's the sack?"

Tortilla Joe pulled the sack out from under his gunbelt. Dismay surged across Buck when he saw how little cash the safe held. Evidently Myers had recently shipped most of his cash to the county seat.

Tortilla Joe stuffed a handful of loose bills into the sack. Then he saw a buckskin pouch. The initials, M. S., were burned on it. It was full of loose change and bills. Tortilla Joe stuffed it into his sack.

They worked quickly. Buck found a few letters pigeon-holed in the safe. He read their return addresses under the lamp.

"Cavalry headquarters in Tucson, Tortilla. Now why would the Army be writing to Myers?"

"Take 'em along, Buck."

Suddenly they wheeled, guns out. Boots were clomping down the plank walk in front of the bank. The sounds ran across the silent night.

"Somebody comin'," grunted Buck. "An' if he looks in those front windows, he's bound to see the safe is open. Get down on your belly, Tortilla."

"We could kill the light, Buck."

Buck shook his head. "Then he *would* be suspicious. He might jus' walk by. Hang tight, cowboy."

The boots pounded closer. Now they could see the man through the big front window. Buck recognized him as a Myers gunman. Now the man had almost walked the length of the bank. Buck breathed easier. The fellow was going by. Then Buck's breath froze.

For the gunman stopped. He put his head to the window and stared into the bank. He couldn't see Buck and Tortilla Joe, there on the floor beside the desk. But he did see the open safe. His mouth dropped open; he turned suddenly.

HE WAS going to warn Len Myers. Buck's .45 rapped out flame. The roar beat against the walls. Hard on its rattling echo came the crash of glass. The man staggered back under the impact of Buck's bullet. He fell around the corner and became lost from view.

"Get outa here, Tortilla! Grab the sack!"

Buck crammed the letters under his shirt. With Tortilla Joe running ahead, he broke out the rear door. Mike had the horses ready. Buck halted, one foot in stirrup.

The wounded gunman was screaming, "Len, Len! Jeb Walker! They're robbin' the bank! Come a-runnin', men! They're gettin' away!"

Doors were banging open. Dogs were barking. Voices were lifting in hot inquiry. Buck heard Len Myers' harsh voice.

"Get your broncs, men! Buck McKee's behin' this. Where's Hank?"

"Back in the alley," cried a man. "Tied up an' gagged!"

Tortilla Joe and Mike Swanson were thundering out of Cottonwood. Buck waited, on horse now. Len Myers' voice came again.

"I'll go to the bank. Maybe they didn't get the safe open—"

Buck grinned, and spurred down the alley. A bullet whistled overhead, and he chuckled. He slid his bronc around a corner, and hit the open country. Ahead, Tortilla Joe and Mike Swanson were riding fast, heading into the rough country.

Buck laid home his spurs. His horse lengthened out, hoofs drumming. He twisted in his saddle, his short-gun raised. But the pursuit had not formed yet. And a wry smile twisted his thin lips. He caught Tortilla Joe and Mike in a mile.

They rode another mile in silence.

"Here they come," grunted Buck.

Tortilla Joe turned in saddle, the money-sack in one hand. A wide smile spread across his homely, dark face. "They cannot catch us," he declared. "Soon we shall be een the badlands, no?" He looked at the money-sack. "Everythin' she ees complete, men. They may feeger we rob the bank, but they cannot prove eet, an' what good is eet without proof? But my life, she ees lackin' one thing, *Senores?*"

"Maria?" asked Buck.

"Maria, *diablo!* Eef only I had one leetle tortilla, *amigos,* ah, she would be heaven, no?"

CHAPTER XVIII

Powdersmoke!

THE MYERS gunmen, toting rifles, hurried for their horses. Myers and Jeb Walker ran into the bank. Myers stared at the open safe, muttering curses.

"They've cleaned it out, Jeb. Took that sack of taxpayers' money."

"We should left that buried out in the hills!"

Myers fell to his knees. "Hell, they even got those letters from the Army! You know what that means, don't you?"

Jeb Walker's face was the color of ashes. "That means we hang!" He ran a trembling finger around the inside of his shirt collar. "McKee find out about Henning—"

"He'll find out," gritted Myers. "Those letters'll tell him! Dang, I figured he was stuffin' me about robbin' the bank tonight!"

"What'll we do, Len?"

"Head after them hellions, Jeb!"

Walker frowned. "But what if we don't catch 'em?"

"Then we ride into Mexico," said Myers, "an' we ride danged fast. McKee can use that evidence to jug or hang the whole gang of us. No, if McKee gets away, head south, fella, head south! 'Cause your head won't be worth a nickel to you on this side of the Line!"

"Come on, Len," a voice hollered outside.

Myers and Walker ran out and hit saddles. Myers held up his hand for a momentary silence. Hurriedly he told them what had happened.

"We gotta get them letters an' that money sack back, men, or we're sunk! An' if we don't get it, then we head south into Mexico. That plain!"

"We'll get it back, Len!"

"Hit the trail, men!"

They left Cottonwood on a hard lope, dust boiling into the moonlight behind them. Gaunt, funereal, Myers headed his riders, a six-shooter in his hand, a rifle in his saddle-boot. Beside him thundered Jeb Walker, his saturnine face heavy with satanic thoughts.

TWO miles ahead, Buck McKee and his men were speeding across the prairie—dark, fast-moving blobs under the silent moonlight.

"They're headin' for the badlands," grunted Walker. "They get up in them canyons an' we'll never—"

"We're gainin'," said Myers.

Their horses were fresh. The broncs of Buck McKee and his men were tired. It became a race against time. If Buck and his men could

reach the badlands soon, they would be safe.

The race continued for five miles. Straining horses ran with widespread nostrils. Saw-roweled Mexican spurs dripped blood. Quirts rose and fell with cutting lashes.

One horse stumbled. He slid on his head, and rolled over. His rider screamed as the bronc rolled over him. Then the horse struggled to his feet and roared across the prairie, bridlereins trailing, stirrups flapping. But the man lay dark and silent against the prairie.

The Myers' riders thundered on. Len Myers' face was a gaunt, terrible mask. Bitterness cut its acid course through him. His empire was falling about him. Years of hard work, of scheming, were being blasted this night. And Buck McKee, riding ahead, was the man who had broken him.

But grim determination spurred through Myers. He was not whipped yet. One thing remained in his favor. His horses and riders were fresh—already Buck McKee and Tortilla Joe and Mike Swanson had ridden miles. Myers quirted his laboring beast.

Gradually, foot by foot, the distance was cut down. Myers pulled his rifle, raised it to his shoulder. He took a quick aim, let the trigger fall. Then he lowered the gun.

"Too far away, Jeb. An' this moonlight ain't so bright right now."

"We can't catch them," said Walker.

Myers pulled ahead of his men. He was riding a tough horse—a fast horse. The badlands were a mile beyond Buck McKee. And, once in that labyrinthine wilderness, Myers knew the hunt would be over.

There Buck McKee and his men could hole up. They could ambush the entire Myers' faction. It would be suicide to ride into the badlands after them. Myers knew that, and the weight was heavy on him.

AGAIN his rifle rose; again the hammer fell. And again he missed. He heard the high whine of a rifle bullet overhead. The sound brought a tight smile to his set lips. He quirted his bronc harder.

He shot again, and missed. Now the shadows cast by the badlands were reaching out, seeming to suck in Buck McKee and his men—pull them into safety. Myers knew he would have time for one more shot.

He pulled in his bronc. He dropped to one knee on the prairie, slammed up his rifle, and took deliberate aim. His sights were dark blots. He centered them on one of the McKee riders. He let the hammer fall. The rifle moved back against his shoulder.

Myers missed.

Now the McKee riders were in the badlands, lost from view. When Myers' men thundered up, Myers was on his feet. His face was bleak, bitter. He had lost; he knew it.

"Hit for the Cabin, men. Get the gang there an' we'll pull out for Mexico." He spun his horse, let his eyes feast hungrily across the moonlit sweep of the Wolf Ridge basin. He had fought, and killed—and lost. He whirled his lathered horse. He rode south, his men pounding behind him.

They rode toward the Cabin.

* * *

REDBIRD and Lieutenant Henning reached the Long S round up camp an hour after Buck and Tortilla Joe and Mike had ridden in to rob the bank. The guards challenged them and listened to Henning's weird story.

"We got Myers and his men," said Henning. "My evidence can send the whole gang to a federal penitentiary."

"An' you want to buy our spreads?"

"Yes."

The ranchers gazed at them in surprise. Somebody said, "Where's Buck McKee? Where's Tortilla Joe? Where's Mike?"

"They rode out a while ago," a man said.

"I seen 'em go," another declared. "You know what? I'll bet them hellions aim to rob Myers' bank! It's only a hunch, but—"

"Every man to his horse," hollered a rancher. "We're ridin' into Cottonwood with this army man. So that's why Myers wanted our land so bad—he wanted to sell it to the gover'ment! Come on, men; let's ride!"

"What about the herd?"

"Leave it drift, hombres. We don't need that herd no longer. We can sell our land tonight an' the Army'll take care of our back-taxes."

The men sleeping under the wagons came instantly awake. The story ran the length of the camp like wildfire. Saddles were slapped on rangy broncs. Calloused hands buckled on heavy gunbelts. Rifles were jammed into saddle-scabbards.

Win Ling hooked his team to the mess-wagon. He was swearing shrilly, his curses directed toward Len Myers. The ranchers swarmed around Henning; Redbird was hardly spoken to. Finally one rancher said, "I've seen you aroun', fella. Didn't you used to ride for Myers?"

"Si, I did."

"What's your part in this, fella? You still loyal to Myers?"

"You talk like a fool, Jim," another rancher said. "If he was loyal to Myers he wouldn't be here, would he?"

"Then what—?"

Redbird said, "I am going to kill Len Myers." His voice was very low.

* * *

BUCK and Tortilla Joe and Mike Swanson pounded up an arroyo, spurred over a brushy hill, and slid their broncs into a gully. A dim trail ran along the gully's bottom. They loped up it, Buck in the lead.

Buck knew how to throw pursuers off his track. He doubled back, cut across trails, rode across lava beds. He could see no pursuit behind them now. But he played his cards close. For almost half an hour, he dodged and twisted. Finally the three riders drew rein under an overthrusting sandstone.

"Lost 'em," grunted Tortilla Joe.

"There they go," said Mike.

The Myers riders were three miles to the east. They were riding through the badlands—and riding fast. They were heading south toward Mexico. Buck frowned.

"I don't get it, fellas. Why is he headin' that direction?"

Tortilla Joe shrugged. "Search me?"

But their questions were soon answered. Tortilla Joe dug into his sack and came out with the laden buckskin pouch. He tossed it to Mike Swanson.

"That's the sack that was taken away from me," said Mike. "The one with the tax money I had under the cowhides. See, there's my initials on it!"

"That peens the deadwood on Myers," said Tortilla Joe.

Buck remembered the letters he had stolen from Myers' safe. He took them from under his shirt. "Still can't see why the Army's writin' to Myers."

Mike lighted a match, palmed it. "Read one," he said.

Buck read:—

United States Army,
Cavalry Unit No. 34,
Tucson, Arizona.
July 25, 1898

Len Myers,
Cottonwood,
Arizona.

Dear Mr. Myers:

Lieutenant William G. Henning will arrive in Wolf Ridge next Thursday. Lieutenant Henning is commissioned to purchase the entire land and water rights to your Long S Ranch and your adjoining ranches bordering Crystal Lake.

After some deliberation, the United States Army has decided definitely that the Wolf Ridge basin is the proper location to construct the new army cavalry remount station to train cavalry personnel and horses for participation in the Spanish-American War.

We trust that you and Lieutenant Henning will come to an early agreement regarding the purchase prices of your Long S Ranch and the other ranches to the United States government.

Sincerely yours,
Maj.-Gen. A. L. Shirley.

"HIS Long S ranch," growled Buck. "Why, the dirty dog! Tellin' the gover'ment he owns the Long S. Now we know why he never wanted that tax money to go through to the county seat!"

"So that's it," grunted Mike. "I'd sell my land any time, men. Too dry in this country. But where is this Henning fella? Nobody's ever seen him in the Wolf Ridge basin?"

"That letter was written almost two weeks ago," said Buck. "Wonder what this one says?"

United States Army,
Cavalry Unit No. 34,
Tucson, Arizona.
August 2, 1898.

Len Myers,
Cottonwood,
Arizona.
Dear Mr. Myers:
Lieutenant William G. Henning was dispatched upon last July 25 to go to Cottonwood and purchase the Wolf Ridge basin country from you. To this date, this office has had no reply from Lieutenant Henning regarding the progress of his mission.
Has Lieutenant Henning contacted your office and, if so, what arrangements were made that the army might possess the Wolf Ridge basin?

Sincerely yours,
Maj.-Gen. A. L. Shirley.

"Maybe Myers kidnapped heem," said Tortilla Joe. "Then the Army man could not tell the other ranchers why he was here, no?"

"You got somethin'," affirmed Buck. "Where would he hold him, though? You got any idea, Mike?"

"I sure dunno, Buck."

Buck scowled. "Well, no use settin' here a-jawin'. We got the evidence we need, now. We can't trail Myers an' his gang alone. We better mosey back an' get the rest of the ranchers!"

"Okay, Buck."

They turned their horses toward the round-up camp, about four miles away. They rode recklessly, silently. Again, they were racing against time. Buck had a hunch that Myers was fleeing into Mexico. The letters Buck had convinced him of that.

They drew rein on a butte and looked down into Wolf Basin. And the scene that lay below them brought grunts of surprise.

For horsemen were moving toward Cottonwood. Men riding hard, dust swirling behind them. And behind the horsemen lumbered a mess-wagon. And Buck recognized the Long S wagon.

"The ranchers," grunted Mike Swanson. "Ridin' for Cottonwood. Now what'd you suppose—"

"We'll soon find out," said Buck.

CHAPTER XIX

Border Death

THEY RODE out and intercepted the ranchers. Lieutenant Henning shook hands with Buck and Tortilla Joe. Quickly he told Buck how he had been kidnapped, held in the Cabin, and how Redbird had rescued him. Buck looked at Redbird.

"Seen you before, ain't I, fella?"

"Two years ago I was in New Mexico. I was bronc-peeler for the Slash T. You an' Tortilla Joe were ridin' line."

"I remember," said Tortilla Joe.

"How do we stand on ammunition?" asked Buck.

The ranchers, anticipating trouble, had ridden out on the round-up with plenty of rifle and pistol bullets. Now they wanted a chance to use them. Loaded rifles were raised in hard hands. Loaded gunbelts rode heavily on their hips. Their six-guns were loaded.

"Myers an' his hombres are headin' for the Cabin," said Redbird. "Then they will cross the line into Mexico. Maybe if we do not hurry we cannot stop them. But I will trail them into Mexico, hombres. I will trail Myers to the gates of hell!"

The 'breed's husky voice vibrated with hate. Buck felt his spine tingle. But precious seconds were being wasted. Buck turned his rearing bronc.

"Where is the cabin, Redbird?"

"I shall lead you to it, hombres. Even now do I know many short-cuts through the badlands. We will catch *el diablo* Myers at the Cabin, and there I will kill him. . . ."

"Hit the trail," grunted Buck.

Redbird led the way. He rode slumped in the saddle. Each step of his horse caused pain to knife through him. His lips were compressed; his eyes were narrowed. He fought the pain. Only hate held him in his saddle.

Buck rode beside the halfbreed. Buck's horse was tired but the beast was game. He was catching his second wind. His wiry muscles moved effortlessly under the saddle. His hammer-head was laid back.

Behind them were Mike and Tortilla Joe. Mike's face was heavy, glum. But the Mexican's dark eyes had a devilish glint in them. Already his heavy nostrils were smelling the burning powder soon to be exploded. Destruction and vengeance stretched ahead—he wanted his share of them.

The ranchers trailed behind. They were a silent, emotionless lot of men. But through them all ran anger. Anger directed toward Len Myers and his cutbank crew.

SOON, amid spattering gunfire, the fate of Wolf Ridge basin would be established. For months the ranchers had been living on the edge of uncertainty. Now the solution to the riddle had been offered. The thing would soon be settled once and for always.

Win Ling, cursing his wagon-broncs, followed the crew, his long lash curling across the team's backs. No wagon had ever gone into the badlands. Win Ling was stubborn. He'd get a wagon in there or bust the reach.

Steadily, the ranchers were pulling away from him. Win Ling's curses rose to a shrill crescendo, accented by the loud *pop* of his blacksnake whip. He called upon the spirits of his ancesters to ride with him on the jouncing, lumbering wagon. But, despite his pleas, the ranchers were leaving him.

They roared across the plain and rode into the badlands. They loped up a wide-bottomed canyon. Win Ling's cracked face showed a wide smile. He could drive his team up that canyon. He'd show them.

One rancher dropped back. "Better leave the wagon here, Win Ling. Unhitch a bronc an' ride him."

"Shutee up!"

The rancher smiled and galloped ahead. Win Ling stood on the shaking, jumping seat, his whip curving over his team, again imploring his ancestors for immediate aid. And mixed with his prayers were many American oaths.

* * *

JEB WALKER spun his rearing mount. He pointed into a gully that ran across the badlands and passed a quarter-mile beyond the Cabin. His voice was shrill with excitement.

"There they come, Len! See 'em down there in that gully! They're takin' a short-cut! They're a-gainin' on us, fella!"

"They'll never catch us," grunted Myers.

Walker pulled his glasses from their case. He focused the lenses momentarily on the ranchers. "Bust my boots," he growled, "but that Redbird gent is ridin' with them, Len." Walker's face was pale. "Or am I seein' a ghost?"

"Here, lemme look!" Myers grabbed the glasses. He studied the oncoming horsemen. "Sure is," he mumbled. "That 'breed musta pulled through, Len. But it don't make no difference now—the jig was up before he got to the ranchers with what he knew. Say, Henning is ridin' with them, too!"

"You're loco!"

Myers handed Walker the glasses. "Look for yourself, wise guy." He turned his horse and started after his men, already some distance ahead. Soon Walker came thundering beside him.

"That was him, Len."

"I got eyes," growled Myers. "Well, the whole thing *is* done with, Jeb. We sure gotta make a run for

Mexico now! We'll warn the boys at the Cabin an' drift across the border."

Walker glanced behind him. "If we can make it into Mexico!"

MYERS was thinking the same thing. Beyond the cabin, the badlands petered out and became a wide desert. A man would be in the open when he rode across that wide expanse. If the ranchers got close enough, they could hole up in the rocks, and kill them with rifles as they rode across that desert.

Two avenues of escape were open to Myers. One, to hit across the desert, push into the undulating heat expanse that led to Mexico—and freedom. The other was, if the ranchers were too close, to hole up in the Cabin and fight it out. For Myers still had the ranchers outnumbered.

Myers glanced over his shoulder. The ranchers were gaining, and gaining fast. Myers knew then that he and his men could never cross the desert. For the ranchers, holed up in the rocks, would kill them as they rode across the level expanse. A rifle bullet whistled overhead breaking up Myers' thoughts.

"We'll hole up in the Cabin," he ordered brusquely.

"There ain't no protection in that Cabin," growled Walker. "Them walls are thin, Len, an' a bullet can go right through them."

"We gotta stick together, Jeb. There's power in numbers. If we drift apart, the ranchers can gang up on us, one at a time, an' wipe us out. But when we stay together, we got more chance."

Walker nodded.

"There's a stove in the Cabin. We can use that for a fort. We gotta make a stand somewhere. The Cabin is the best place I know of!"

Two guards came from the brush. "What's up, Len?" asked the taller.

"Where's Henning?"

"In the Cabin, of course."

Myers laughed harshly. "I oughta kill you both," he gritted. "Look back yonder, men. Slim, you got a pair of field-glasses? Take a short squint at those ranchers."

Slim lowered his glasses, his eyes showing puzzlement. "Henning's ridin' with the ranchers, Myers. He—he—musta broke away. Why, hell, man, we never seen him bust out! Maybe that's another Army man."

Myers studied him. "Next thing I know," he said dangerously, "you'll be sayin' there must be two Hennings! Twins!" His hands rested hard on his holstered guns. "I oughta gut-shoot you two right here!"

"Forget it," murmured Walker.

TWO OTHER guards came high-tailing out of the brush. Myers told them what had happened. Myers spoke in sharp, staccato tones. They, too, were unaware of Henning's escape. A thin smile tugged warningly at Myers' lips.

"Get into the Cabin, all of you. Load your rifles and six-shooters. Knock out the windows an' kick some holes in the walls right above the floor so you can shoot outa them. Hello, who's this?"

They were staring at the man who lay on the floor. Myers kicked him over with the toe of his boot, and the bloody face of Clem stared unseeingly up at them. Myers lifted the dead man's right arm, let it drop. Rigor mortis had set in. Myers cursed.

"One for the book," he mumbled. "The prisoner has escaped an' four husky, boneheaded men are guardin' a dead man!"

The renegades worked quickly. Heavy boots kicked the panes out of windows. There was a ten-pound sledge in the corner. One man went around the Cabin, knocking holes in its frame sides just above the floorline. These would be used to shoot from. When a man lays on his belly and shoots, he makes a smaller target—and is therefore harder to hit.

Renegades took positions. They unloaded the cartridges from their belts and heaped them on the floor at their elbows. They checked the cylinders in their short-guns, looked to the loads in their rifles. A few toted heavy rocks inside to use as a barrier against bullets tearing through the Cabin.

Two men led their saddlehorses up on the high peak behind the Cabin. They hid the horses in the brush there and tied them. Then they went back to the Cabin.

Maybe, if the ranchers drove them from the Cabin, some of them could retreat through the brush, get their hidden broncs, and have a chance to make a get-a-way. But that hope, at its brightest, was very tarnished. The hill behind the Cabin was very steep and the brush and foliage was not very thick. The horses were hidden over the apex of the hill.

Their faces were grim, stern. Yet, in the face of death, they joked and laughed. But their jokes, and their laughter, were forced. Some of them would die this night of the blood red moon. Some of them would not see the dawn of day. They would not see the sun peep up over the high hills and light the rangelands with its mystic beauty. . . .

But you could never tell that from their short talk. They were hard men, and they had killed; they had chosen the way of the gun—by the gun they would die. Each man knew that.

All had been in gunfights before. One limped on his left leg. A bullet from the gun of a marshal in Tombstone had once broken his leg. But the marshal had died. . . .

Once coughed continuously. He did not have tuberculosis. A bullet had once torn through his right lung. The wound had healed, but an irritation remained. Nobody paid any attention to his rasping cough.

Myers lay on his belly behind the stove. He raised his rifle, aiming out the window. But before his hammer could drop three bullets whammed in through the Cabin's wall. Myers' smile was enigmatic.

"The fireworks have started, men!"

CHAPTER XX

Bloody Moon

THE CANYON gradually grew narrower. Finally it was too narrow for Win Ling's mess-wagon. The wagon lurched against a big boulder and stopped. Win Ling's voice was shrill as he pleaded with the lathered team.

"Gettee move on, long-ear jackass horse! You pull against them collar! Gettee—"

The ranchers, unmindful of Win Ling's curses, rode around the bend. Win Ling grabbed his rifle and followed them on foot. He did not have to walk far. The ranchers had halted in the brush. Buck McKee was giving orders.

"The Cabin is right above us, men. Myers an' his gunmen have holed up there to fight it out. This ain't gonna be no Sunday school picnic. Some of us are goin' to stop lead. Some of us might get killed. If you ain't got no taste for brush-fightin', you better get on your bronc an' head back for your home ranch. We got a tough job ahead, men!"

"We're with you, McKee!"

"Lead the way, Buck!"

With Buck and Tortilla Joe in the lead, they climbed the cutbank, sliding in the talus. Mike Swanson, rifle in hand, followed behind Buck, and Win Ling, murmuring curses, followed Mike. The rest of the ranchers trailed behind.

They reached the summit. Here the brush stood high as a man. Through its leafy screen they could see the Cabin. The building stood ominous, silent.

"They musta pulled out," muttered Mike. "Their horses are gone."

"Prob'ly hid them back on the hill," said Buck. "We'll see if anybody is home." He shot once with his rifle. The bullet cut through the Cabin. Returning gunfire caused them all to lie flat in the brush. Buck smiled. "They're in there, men."

"What's your plan, McKee?"

"The steep bank behind the Cabin will keep them from goin' out that way. That leaves only the front to guard. Spread out in a half-circle. Never stand up straight. You make too easy a target that way. Crawl on your hands and knees. Lay flat when the bullets start coming. When you advance under gunfire crawl on your belly. Don't take unnecessary chances. Most of you men have

families. You want to go back to them. Whether you go back or not depends upon how you fight here. Now take your positions."

THEY were moving through the brush, then. Stooped-over men, gaunt and unshaven, toting rifles, six-guns. A volley of gunfire from the Cabin raked through the brush. The ranchers dropped flat on their bellies. Buck's voice was cynical as he spoke to Tortilla Joe.

"One of 'em wounded already, Tortilla. Damn, I told them to creep, not walk. But they'll learn, fella. They'll either learn or die."

"*Si*, Buck."

The ranchers were crawling on their hands and knees now. Then the thick brush hid them from view. Buck and Tortilla Joe lay on their bellies. They pooled their cartridges, placing them in a heap between them.

Mike Swanson lay on Buck's left. He was shooting over a sandstone rock. He looked at Buck and smiled recklessly. Buck glanced at Redbird. He lay beyond Tortilla Joe, a flat figure pressing against the earth. Evidently the half-breed had done plenty of this brush fighting before.

Redbird's thin face was marked with stern lines. His lips were a dark slash in his bloodless face. Buck felt a sudden admiration touch him. The 'breed was dead on his feet, sick and weak. Yet he fought—and fought hard.

Buck could see Henning, too. The Army man hunkered behind a big rock, shooting with a borrowed rifle. Then bullets whipping through the brush over him brought his mind back to Len Myers.

Bullets were coming from the Cabin. Bullets from the open door, the broken windows, the holes along the floor. The ranchers were answering the renegades' firings. But the ranchers did not know much about gun-fighting. A glance told Buck that.

Buck said, "Don't shoot where they are, Tortilla. Shoot where you think they should be. . . ."

"*Si*, hombre."

Buck's reasoning was simple, yet correct. The Myers men would fire from a window, then step hurriedly to one side. The ranchers, firing through the window, would miss. Buck did not do that. He fired through the Cabin on either side of the window.

A gun-barrel protruded from a floor-hole. Buck shot real low. He knew the rifleman was lying flat on the floor. He did not shoot through the hole. He shot through the wall a foot below it.

He did not see the rifleman, but he knew he had killed him. For the rifle was not pulled back. Nor did it fire again.

"One of the hellions, Tortilla."

BUCK ran a critical eye over the brush. He could not see the ranchers, but he could see the puffs of powdersmoke. They were doing all right. They lay behind sandstones and boulders.

He glanced at the slope back of the Cabin. Heavy brush lined the slope directly back of the Cabin. Farther up the brush petered out and became a clearing. In order to escape, the Myers men would have to traverse that clearing. And, in so doing, they would write their death warrants. For the ranchers, hidden and secure, could pick them off easily.

"We got 'em, Tortilla."

Tortilla Joe grunted, "*Si*—mebbeso. But thees fight, eet ees liable to take a long, long time, no? Me, I do not like to fight too long, *amigo*. An' I am hongry for a tortilla."

Buck smiled. "You're lucky Maria ain't here, fella. How'd you like to have her with you now?"

Tortilla Joe grimaced. "She would be hell, no? But she would not be here long, Buck. She ees so beeg that all the Myers men would have to do is fire her direction, an' they would be sure to heet her. When thees ees over, we ride out from here, no? That woman she weel be my death, Buck."

"Okay, Tortilla."

"Theenk of bein' married to her," murmured Tortilla Joe. "The *muchachos*, they would come. They would be fat an' squallin'. She would

waddle aroun', fat an' beeg an' homely—ugh, she ees make my stomach seeck, hombre!"

A bullet ricocheted off a nearby rock. Tortilla Joe took his mind off Maria and applied it to the grim business on hand. His rifle spoke twice. He squinted through the smoke.

"Mebbe I get heem—mebbe no. . . ."

The Mexican scowled. Buck knew what was bothering him. The same thing was bothering Buck. The ranchers were shooting a lot. Some of those shells connected, others missed. But most of them, Buck knew, were wasted.

The ranchers had lots of shells. But they were too reckless, too impetuous. They were burning a great deal of powder. And, at this rate, they would run out of shells.

"Save ammunition," Buck told Mike. "Shoot only when you have a good chance of connecting. Pass the word down the line."

Mike whispered the message to the man beside him. Quickly the word passed through the brush. The firing was cut down almost immediately.

Dawn was breaking in the east. The darkness was falling back before the advancing daylight. The colorless moon was dipping beyond the western hills, its duty completed.

The fight dragged on. The sun climbed higher. Heat waves formed, danced across the badlands. Buck took off his shirt. The sun was blistering hot. A canteen passed from hand to hand. Lukewarm water trickled down parched throats. Men spat and cursed and grinned.

The fight went on. . . .

* * *

THE Cabin was filled with the stench of powdersmoke and a stifling heat. The Myers gunmen conserved their water in anticipation of the afternoon heat. They were grim of face, grim in speech. Retreat was impossible. They would have to kill or be killed.

Myers' voice was a lash prodding them to action. The big man's eyes were bloodshot, sunken pools. A bullet had raked across his stubbled jaw. His neck was flecked with dried blood. He had not bound the wound, which had stopped bleeding of its own accord.

Disregarding danger, he moved upright across the Cabin, bossing his gunmen. Once a bullet tore through the slack in his sleeve. Another whammed into a two-by-four beside him. But he bore a charmed life.

Jeb Walker hunkered beside the door. A compact, tough ball of humanity, he held his rifle with hard hands. His eyes were small, bright. He looked up at Len Myers.

"I got another, Len."

"You better get plenty of them," growled Myers. "'Cause if you don't, it's lights out for us, fella."

"We'll win."

"Hope you're right, fella."

Three men were dead. One, a pock-faced, thick-lipped Mexican, lay on his back, his arms flung out. Blood covered his gaudy serape. Beside him, motionless in death, lay the man who coughed all the time. Death had been merciful; death had stilled his cough forever. The other dead man was a slim, reckless-looking youngster, his face showing that, due to his gun-fast life, he had aged before his time.

A heavy-shouldered, broken-nosed man nursed a shattered leg in silence. He lay on his belly shooting out of a floor-hole, his leg limp and bloody. He cursed methodically. The cursing grew tiresome, rubbed against raw nerves.

"Forgit that cursin', Jake," one man warned ominously. "You'll prob'ly face your Maker soon enough. You've cursed him all your life. No use goin' to him with curses on your lips."

"Listen to him," scoffed Jake. "What are you, a sky-pilot, Ike? Listen to him, men! Somebody get him a box to stand on!"

Ike's voice tightened dangerously. "Don't say too much, Jake. . . ."

LEN MYERS cut in with, "Shut up, both of you! We got plenty of enemies to fight without fightin' each other!"

Jake said, "Make him lay off me, Myers."

"No more, Jake."

Jake grinned, sighted, let his hammer fall. He heard his bullet wham off a rock. He frowned.

"Them hellions are purty well hid, Len. Hard to hit."

"I was in a battle with Kit Carson," said a man. "Over in the Round Rock country. We fit the Injuns for six days, I tell you. We—"

A bearded man chuckled. "There he goes ag'in, gents. Hell, he never even seen Kit Carson, let alone ride with him. Tell us about the time you come into New Mexico with Cortez, Windy?"

"Cortez? Who's he?"

The bearded man said, "You don't know about Cortez, huh? Now that's funny!" A tight laugh swept through his beard. Other outlaws were grinning. The bearded man shot suddenly. "Missed again," he murmured.

"They're hard to hit, Gus."

"Jus' like brush rabbits. You see a piece of them an' then fire. By that time they're out of sight an' safe."

"We're gettin' some of 'em."

The Cabin was scorchingly hot. Despite the ventilation caused by the open door and the broken windows—to say nothing of the floorholes—not a breath of air moved through the frame building. Sweat poured from the men. Sweat trickled down bearded cheeks and into bloodshot eyes.

"Wait'll this afternoon," said Walker.

"Go easy on that water," warned Len Myers. "We got quite a bit of it in canteens, but we ain't got too much. An' when that's gone I dunno where we'll git any more."

"There's a pump out in front, Len."

Myers smiled tightly. "You wanta go out an' get some cool water, Gus? You wanta walk out there an' pump some?"

The hours dragged on. A wounded man moaned, clutching his broken ribs. Only the dead were silent.

Myers' face was a study. Slowly but surely, he was being defeated. His only hope was to hold out until night. There would be a dark spell between sundown and the moonrise. And in that interim, he and his men would try to escape up the hill. Covered by darkness, they would have a chance.

His men knew this, too. Grimly, stubbornly, they fought. Time ticked slowly by. Noon came, then two o'clock. It was a race against time. Would the passage of time save them?

Few words were spoken. Those passed were grunts, low words. When three o'clock came the canteens were empty. Heavy tongues clung to parched mouths. Overhead, a fly buzzed. They could hear him when the gunfire was silent. The sound grew monotonous.

"Dang that fly," growled a man.

CHAPTER XXI

Pistol Punishment

BUCK MCKEE knew this: the longer the battle lasted, the less chance the ranchers would have to win it. When night came, Myers' men could leave the Cabin, and retreat up the slope.

Crawling on his hands and knees, Buck made a tour of inspection. True to his prediction, the ranchers were running low on bullets. But they were shooting more carefully now.

"Only takes one bullet to kill a man," said Buck. "Save your gunfire, men. Might need it real bad later on."

"They'll try to escape come dark, Buck."

"We gotta get 'em before then, Jim."

"But how?"

Buck didn't answer that question. He did not know the answer. He knew that, somehow, he would have to get Myers' renegades into the open. But how?

Two of the ranchers were dead. Buck squatted beside one of them, his throat dry. The man had a wife and a small baby. Inwardly, Buck cursed Len Myers, who was responsible for this man's death.

Another had a broken arm. A bullet had shattered the ankle on a heavy-set man. A tall man had a bullet groove along his ribs. He grinned through his pain.

"We'll smoke 'em out, McKee!"

Buck nodded. He had no answer. Eventually, they would drive the Myers men from the Cabin—but could they do it before dark? For if they didn't—

A rifle bullet splattered gravel at Buck's boots. Another whammed into an oak beside him. Buck lay silent, rifle up, watching the Cabin. He raised his rifle slowly, taking care to move no foliage—then he took careful sight, and shot once. He heard a man's thin scream above the gunfire.

Buck wormed his way back to Tortilla Joe. The Mexican's heavy face was wet with sweat, but his usual grin was there. Back of that grin, though, Buck detected an uneasiness.

"We gotta get 'em out before dark, Buck."

"Yeah, but how?"

TORTILLA JOE studied the Cabin thoughtfully. "That," he finally announced, "I do not know, hombre. But there must be some way, no?" His face brightened. "Maybe we could burn 'em out, no?"

"How?"

"We could sneak through the brush an' get behin' the Cabin, Buck. Then we could light some brush an' throw it against the Cabin!"

"An' get killed *muy pronto*," finished Buck. "Nope, I don't wanta die that bad, Tortilla. They'd concentrate their lead on us an' wipe us off'n the map of Arizona. There must be another way, huh?"

"Let us go at thees systematically, huh?" We cannot burn the shack down. We would stop lead an' get keeled. What other way are there to get the shack out of the way, Buck?"

"Pull it down."

Tortilla Joe studied him curiously. "The heat, she ees hot, no? But not that hot, Buck! How do you feel, *amigo?*"

Buck grinned and chewed a straw. "Them eaves on the Cabin look like they're almost rotted through. The foundation has all been et out by the white ants. The sidin' is sun-blistered and dry as tinder. Me, I say we could pull that shack down."

"With a saddle-horse?"

"No, with a team."

"But we ain't got—" Tortilla Joe corrected himself hastily. "*Si*, we have a team. Win Ling's team, no? But we need rope, hombre."

Buck called, "Win Ling, come here."

The Oriental wriggled over to them. "What is it, Missa Buck?"

Buck outlined their plan. Win Ling's eyes glowed. "I knew the team would be handy. I go get them. . . ."

Buck went with him. They wormed through the brush, dipped over the cutbank, and slid in the soft earth downward.

"Only thing that gets me," said Buck, "is that we have no rope. We could tie all of our catchropes together, but they wouldn't be strong enough."

"We got rope," declared Win Ling. "The rope corral is in the wagon. That's one-inch rope. Then we have some more heavy rope, too."

The Oriental was right. Buck's eyes glistened as he looked at the heavy rope. They unhitched the team by pulling out the kingbolt. This way, they had the team still hitched to the double-trees.

BUCK tied the rope to the double-trees. They had a difficult time getting the team up the slope. There was a wide ledge close to the top. They got the team on this. Win Ling held them there.

The wagon-broncs were skittish. The whistle of bullets overhead made them snort and paw. The sound of the exploding gunfire scared them. But Win Ling held the reins firmly, his scrawny hand a claw on the ribbons.

Laying on his belly, Buck pulled the rope up, coiling it beside him. He would need quite a length of rope to encircle the cabin. Finally he had it all coiled beside him.

He wondered if it were long enough. He knew it was strong enough—it was new rope. Tortilla

Joe squinted at the pile, and grunted.

"Got enough, Buck?"

"Only one way to find out, Tortilla. That's circle the cabin with it. Then we'll know."

Mike Swanson crept to them. They told him what they aimed to do. The young rancher's eyes sparkled.

"I'll pass the word along to the men," he said. "Jus' who's goin' circle the house with the rope?"

"The three of us better work at it," replied Buck. "Be quite a job, Mike. You feed the rope to me an' Tortilla. We'll sneak aroun' back of the house. See that it flows freely an' keep the kinks out of it."

They left one end of the rope tied to the double-trees. Win Ling stayed with the horses. Buck hunkered, a cold cigaret on his underlip, and studied the situation coldly.

Getting the rope to the house would not be hard. Of course, the job was risky. But the risky part would come when they pulled the rope around the back of the Cabin.

Buck and Tortilla Joe were creeping forward now, pulling the rope behind them. They worked slowly, cautiously. Suddenly Tortilla Joe collapsed and lay limp on his belly. He was coughing loudly.

Terror stabbed at Buck. He lay beside his partner, shaking him. "They get you, Tortilla?"

Tortilla Joe coughed again, and spat up his chew. "That bullet came danged close, Buck. It made me almost swaller my chaw!"

Relief flooded through Buck. But he hid it under an oath. "Figured sure they'd got you," he grunted.

THE ranchers were holding their fire. They were afraid of hitting Buck and Tortilla Joe. At last the pair halted, there beside the corner of the Cabin. They studied the area back of the shack. "There's a big rock behin' the house," murmured Buck. "We can hang the rope on it. Then Win Ling can take up the slack real fast. That way, the rope won't fall all the way to the ground when it is jerked off the rock."

"No?"

"It'll go ahead an' catch the Cabin right aroun' the middle. An' then watch the fireworks, Tortilla."

Tortilla Joe said realistically, "But the beeg job ees to get the rope on the rock. That will not be easy to do, *amigo*, weeth the gunmen in the Cabin. Maybe we get shot, no?"

Buck knew his partner was right. But they had to take a chance. One element was in their favor. The Myers men were all fighting at the front of the Cabin. Only a foolhardy crazy man would venture on the hills behind the Cabin.

Dusk was coming swiftly, too. That also aided Tortilla Joe and Buck. But it also made them work faster. The ranchers could not afford to let the fight continue into the night. They had to end it—and end it pronto.

They halted, suddenly. A small clearing, there on the side of the cut-bank, lay before them. The space was about fifteen feet wide. Tortilla Joe looked at Buck.

"How we cross it, Buck?"

"No other way than to make a run for it, Tortilla." Buck pulled some slack in the rope. "You stay here, fella. Cover my advance."

"Okay."

Tortilla Joe trained his short-gun on the Cabin. Now Buck was darting across the clearing, rope in one hand, gun in the other. Once he slipped in the shale, and almost fell. Then Tortilla Joe saw him disappear in the opposite brush. The gross Mexican crossed himself.

Tortilla Joe fed the rope to Buck. The rope was running short. But they needed only enough length to encircle the other side of the Cabin. Now Tortilla had to cross the clearing.

He bunched his legs, and lunged forward. A bullet ripped into the earth, throwing sand on his leg. The fat Mexican catapulted across the space. Another bullet sang behind him. Then he was hidden by the brush, and the rifleman could not see him.

"You okay?" asked Buck.

Tortilla Joe panted, "My breath, she ees lost. Beside that, I am all right, *amigo*."

Buck heard a Myers man holler.

"Hey, Len, I saw the Mexican. He was behin' the Cabin. We better station some guards over here. They're tryin' to surround us!"

"T'Hades you say, fella! Hey, two of you gents go over there. Watch that back close!"

BUCK AND Tortilla Joe continued onward. Once a bullet whammed a tree beside Buck. They had about twenty feet to go, now. Mike was feeding out the rope slower.

There was a big oak ahead. Buck hoped they had rope enough to reach it. They had. Buck tied the rope around the oak. Then he studied their handiwork, and what he saw brought him satisfaction.

The Cabin was in the center of a noose. When the rope tightened, it would be like pulling shut the strings on a Bull Durham sack. Buck and Tortilla Joe worked their way back to Win Ling.

"You all settee, Missee Buck?"

"Everything's okay, Win Ling. Mike, tell the ranchers the stage is set. We're pullin' the Cabin down."

"All rightee—"

Buck grabbed the reins. "Not yet, Win Ling. Me an' Tortilla Joe are goin' back on top an' get in on the end."

Win Ling spat. "How I know when you ready?"

"See that white rock across the canyon? Settin' on top of that sandstone? When we're all set, I'll shoot that rock off'n the sandstone. Then jus' turn your broncs loose. The faster they go down the hill the better."

"They'll go fast enough, Missee Buck."

Buck and Tortilla Joe crawled back into the brush. Mike Swanson wormed up to them. Buck asked him if the ranchers all knew the stage was set. Mike had warned them all. Buck studied the Cabin thoughtfully.

He turned, then, and shot across the canyon. The white rock rolled over backwards, disappeared. Win Ling, below them, cursed shrilly.

His team lunged down-slope.

CHAPTER XXII

Gunsmoke Finish

THE HEAVY rope slapped off the rock. It whammed against the Cabin, catching it below the windows. The rope tightened with a terrible lunge.

Guns ready, the ranchers watched and waited. For one second, the Cabin stood staunch, braced against the heavy pull. Then, suddenly, the eaves popped. Rusty nails gave way. Boards snapped.

The Myers men were screaming. They never even had time to get to the doorway. The Cabin collapsed like a broken egg. One man dived through the window. He landed hard, the window-frame around his neck.

Planks were scattered widely. The homemade table was a wreck. The cookstove was ripped to pieces. One man was under it, fighting to get free.

Then Win Ling's team hit the end of the rope. Almost two tons of solid horseflesh came to a jarring stop. The doubletree popped under the impact. Dragging Win Ling by the reins, the team stampeded down the canyon.

Myers' men were debouching from the wreckage. Their only hope of escape lay in reaching the brush. They ran over flaming guns, their compactness making them hard targets. Buck stopped one in stride. Then, from the corner of his eye, he saw Myers.

The big man was escaping. Even now, he was slipping into the brush. Buck moved forward, his gun up, he headed for Myers.

Cold fear tugged at Buck's heart. Once over the ridge, Myers would have a good chance to escape. Buck had to stop him before he reached the high country.

Recklessly Buck ran forward, guns ready. Guns were roaring. He heard a Myers man scream, but the sound died unregistered on Buck's mind. The crackle of gunfire was loud in the dusk. It beat against the sun-scorched hills and echoed across the ravines.

BUCK circled wide. He wanted to get ahead of Myers, and waylay the man. Then, when he saw Len, he would step into the trail and challenge him. Buck's lips were a bloodless line.

Catclaw tore at his clothes. Tangled *chamiso* brush blocked his path. He fought through it, his breath coming fast. Now he found a dim trail. He ran along it.

Ahead, he heard a man crashing through the brush. That, he knew, was Myers. Hope speared through him. His plan was working successfully. Then, to his right, he heard more brush crackle. He frowned. Who was that?

Had Tortilla Joe also seen Myers' make his escape? Buck wondered if the other man was his partner. But he had little time for conjecture. His breath wheezing, Buck hurried on.

Once he stumbled on a rotted log and fell on his face. But he was up again, moving ahead. He skirted the lip of a gully. He knew then he had won. For, behind him, he heard Myers' heavy tread. He did not hear the other man now.

Perhaps the man had given up the chase. A fat man like Tortilla Joe would have a tough time busting brush this thick. Then Buck dismissed those conjectures; he centered all his thoughts on the man who, even now, was rounding the hill, and coming toward him.

LEN MYERS came at a dog-trot. His heavy face was flushed, his suit was torn. But there was a glow of victory in the big man's deep eyes. He had made his escape. He was safe.

Myers carried a .45 in his right hand Evidently he had discarded his rifle so he could run faster. He advanced, unaware of Buck.

Buck, hidden in the brush beside the trail, waited. His leg muscles were tight. His knuckles gripped his .45. Inside he was cold, deadly. He watched Myers carefully.

Myers was thirty feet away now. Buck tensed, ready to step into the trail. Then suddenly he settled back, his brow furrowed.

For, ten feet beyond Buck, a man had stepped into the trail, and challenged Len Myers. A slender runt of a man, bent almost double with pain. Buck knew now who the other man—the man running through the brush—had been.

Redbird said, "You're not gettin' away, Myers!"

Myers halted suddenly. Wide-legged, he stared at Redbird. There was a moment of silence. The paleness left Len Myers' stern face.

"What'd you want, Redbird?"

Redbird's voice was low. "I saw you sneak into the brush. I trailed you, Myers. I'm payin' you back for what you did to me at the Cabin. I'm killin' you, Myers."

The half-breed's voice was a metallic purr. Buck felt something grip his guts. He had never heard a voice like that before. The hate in it rasped against him. He watched, hidden.

Redbird had a gun in his hand. So did Myers. Neither man spoke again. Each knew that further words were useless. Myers stiffened, his gun rapping flame, he was cat quick.

Myers' bullets smashed into Redbird's chest. A fierce elation lifted Myers' gaunt eyes as Redbird fell forward. But Redbird, as he fell, thumbed his hammer three times. Redbird was dead when he hit the ground, but not before he knew he had killed Len Myers.

For the three bullets hammered into Len Myers' heart. They turned the big man, as though he'd been slugged with a sledge. Myers' eyes became blank, then emotionless.

His giant knees buckled slowly, and he sprawled forward. One hand went out, groveling in the dirt. Buck watched that hand stiffen, then become still. The gun-roar died.

Throat tight, Buck moved forward. He rolled Myers over. The man was dead. The lines had left his face and his eyes were clear. But there was power about him, even in death.

Buck knelt beside Redbird. He fingered the 'breed's wrist, found no pulse. Suddenly, then, he heard boots behind him. His hands dropped to holstered guns.

Jeb Walker's voice said, "Don't pull your gun, McKee!"

BUCK DID not get to his feet. He turned, still on his knees. Jeb Walker stood fifteen feet away, both guns trained on him. And there was a triumphant twist to Jeb Walker's thick lips.

"Where'd you come from, Walker?"

"Heard the shootin' over this direction. Figured maybe Len was over here an' needed some help. Him an' the 'breed dead?"

"Both dead," murmured Buck.

Walker said, "You'll be dead pronto, McKee. . . ."

"You'l never get away with it," said Buck. He was stalling. Already his mind was searching coldly for an avenue of escape. Walker's guns were out; Walker had the edge. "The ranchers'll hunt you down an' kill you."

"Maybe," growled Walker, "an' maybe not."

Buck's heart hammered against his ribs. He had only once chance, a slim chance. That was to pull his guns suddenly and fire. Now his guns were rising from leather. And Jeb Walker's Colts were bucking flame.

Buck heard a bullet whine over his head. Dimly, he heard another sock into the dead Redbird. Savage elation pulled at him as he fell forward, firing as he fell. Walker had missed his first two shots.

Buck's hammers were falling when Walker's Colts roared again. A hot iron stabbed across Buck's forearm. But Walker's other bullet went wild. That was because Buck's twin slugs, coming the moment before, had ripped into Jeb's throat, deflecting his aim.

Walker lunged forward, momentum carrying him ahead. Coldly, Buck shot again, both bullets pounding Walker's chest. Walker dropped his smoking guns, tripped over Len Myers' inert form, and fell flat on his face. He never moved.

Buck got to his feet, reloading his guns. He toed Walker over. The man was dead. Then Buck tensed. Boots were pounding toward him. Guns up, he covered the trail.

Two men came around the curve. Buck lowered his guns. Tortilla Joe's eyes widened as he saw the dead men.

"You all right, Buck?"

Buck nodded. "The others?"

"We got all the Myers men," said Mike Swanson gravely. "Most of 'em are dead. We heard your shootin' here an' came to investigate. We got four of our men wounded, an' two are dead. They were good men, Buck."

"Good men," murmured Buck.

CHAPTER XXIII

Home Sweet Home. . . .

THEY THREW a big barn dance at the Long S that Saturday night. Everybody who could walk, creep, or ride came to the shindig. Cowboys rode down from the mountain spreads, their boots polished, their spurs jingling, their top-horses prancing. Grizzled ranchers rode in with their gun-hung riders.

Buckboards rolled in loaded with women, kids, and the older people. Range belles paraded in leg-of-mutton dresses, bustles, and saucy pie-plate hats.

Army men mingled with the cow-people. The Crystal Lake ranchers had sold their holdings to Uncle Sam. The cavalry officers were rushing plans for the establishment of the remount station. From here would go trained cavalry riders and trained horses to fight for the Stars and Stripes.

Even Major-General Shirley was present. Buck introduced himself to the grouchy oldster.

"What's on your mind, McKee?"

Buck grinned. "This ain't hardly what you'd call my business, General. But this young Henning fella is awful 'fraid you'll bust him 'cause he let Len Myers kidnap him."

"What reason have I for not takin' proper disciplinary measures against Lieutenant Henning, McKee?"

Buck nodded toward Henning. He was leading a square dance with Jean

Swanson. Jean wore a white, puff-sleeved dress. Her clear skin was creamy under the hanging kerosene lamps. Her tiny patent-leather shoes twinkled as she danced. And she had eyes only for Lieutenant Henning.

"He has found a girl, huh, McKee?"

Buck smiles, "*The* girl, it looks like."

"In that case," said General Shirley pompously, "I shall have to take young Henning aside, and inform him of the responsibilities of matrimony. Very nice girl, McKee." General Shirley studied him, his eyes twinkling under their heavy white brows. "You mean to say you are goin' to stand idle an'—"

"That's it," murmured Buck, smiling. "Now as we were sayin' about Henning—"

"Henning will prosper, sir. A fine young man, Henning." The general's eyes were gay. "Oh, a minute, McKee. You will introduce me to a lady, of course?"

BUCK introduced the general to Maria. Maria's eyes flashed fire. She glided off in the general's arms, smiling widely, bracelets jingling. Buck looked at Lieutenant Henning and winked. Henning and Jean danced close.

"What'd the general say?"

"You're sittin' purty," said Buck.

"Thanks."

Henning and Jean danced away. Just then a wrinkled, stooped oldster entered, carrying an armful of newspapers. He started distributing them. Buck took one. It was the *Cottonwood Couriers* first extra.

MYERS, WALKER KILLED IN GUNFIGHT; MYERS GANG GOES TO FEDERAL PENITENTIARY

Army Buys Crystal Lake

Led by Buck McKee, a friend of Mike Swanson, the Crystal Lake ranchers fought the Myers gang at the Cabin, and Len Myers was killed by Redbird, his former hired hand.

Tortilla Joe, Buck McKee's partner, also participated in the battle. Yesterday the Army officials announced they had bought the entire Crystal Lake area for a base for a new remount station.

Buck handed the paper to Mike Swanson. "You read it, fellow," he said. "Say, where's Tortilla Joe?"

"Over there in the orchestra."

"What the heck—?" Buck went to where the orchestra was located, there at the other end of the barn. Tortilla Joe was puffing into his mouth-organ, his lips curled around the instrument. "What you doin' here, Tortilla?"

"Two theengs," said Tortilla Joe. "First, I am help with the *musica*. Next, Maria, she ees no chase me, eef I play in the orchestra. She ees jus' stan' an' watch me. Where ees she now?"

"Dancin' with the general."

TORTILLA JOE lowered his mouth-organ. He watched Maria and the general. Maria was cooing into the army man's ears. Her eyes were limpid pools. Tortilla Joe smiled widely.

"Come outside," said Buck.

They flattened against the wall. Buck twisted a cigaret. His arm was stiff, but the wound was healing.

"How about me an' you joinin' the Army, Tortilla?"

"What Army?"

"The United States Army, of course. What'd you think we'd join—the Mexican *caballeros?*"

Tortilla Joe studied him. "Since when did you get thees idea, no?"

"Henning an' me been talkin'. We could get in the cavalry an' see some strange countries.

"Where do we go?" asked Tortilla Joe.

"Go into the recruiting office at at Tucson. They need cavalrymen. Are you a citizen, Tortilla?"

"A ceeteezen? What is he?"

"He was born in Texas," explained Buck. "How about it, Tortilla?"

"Let's go," grunted Tortilla Joe.

They ran to their horses, hit leather and rode out at a fast gallop, heading for Tucson. . . .

(THE END)

KILLER INSTINCT

By W. J. Reynolds

They all thought that Abner Darnell was afraid — and they were right. But they were wrong about what it was Abner feared.

ABNER DARNELL stacked the books in a neat row on the home-made table. He stood quietly a moment, his gaze roving over the small room. He felt a nostalgic affection for the place as if he were already gone. The rough benches askew, just a the eager kids had left them at his word of dismissal. The fireplace at one end with its carefully banked bed of coals for tomorrow's fire.

But would there be school tomorrow? More important, would there be a teacher? Perhaps school would be automatically cancelled until the trustees could find another teacher. Abner Darnell might be dead tomorrow. Or next day.

Abner's hand strayed to the butt of the Colt that had rode heavily under his coat since yesterday. Abner disliked carrying guns. This was the first time he had carried it on his person since his father had given it to him five years ago in the Tennessee hills. He knew how to use it, though. Like all boys, he'd shot quite a lot, but unlike most of his neighbor boys he'd not carried it constantly and shot it off to worry the older folks.

Abner was afraid when he carried a gun, afraid of himself. He had even become more afraid when one night he'd happened to overhear a conversation about himself. It was one night at a dance, Sim Cone was swaggering around with his pistol strapped on and made a remark about Abner's aversion to a gun.

"Hell, he's scarit, no guts," Cone said.

Abner's best friend, Wayb Nelson, looked coldly at the big braggart. "I'd shore not depend on that, Sim. D'ye ever notice how he can chunk bullet in a knot hole? Notice the scary, cold look he gets? He's scarit all right but not of nobody. He's scarit of himself!"

"Wayb's right," said Jake Benson, an older man with two notches on his rifle stock. "Abner's a killer, or will be if he ever starts."

Abner had eased away, sick at heart and wet with perspiration. They were right and he knew it but he'd never had his secret fear put into words before. And he'd never known that it was obvious to others. He'd never shot a gun after that night and had left soon after. Last year he'd got this job teaching school in the little backwoods settlement in Texas.

Abner shivered as his hand touched the warm metal of the gun. He tried to relax and shrug away the savage feeling that rose in his breast at the snug feel of the gun butt. He went to the window, keeping well back, and studied the surrounding terrain carefully then to the opposite side. He could detect no untoward movement among the winter stripped trees that hemmed in the schoolhouse.

IF BILL GRIFFIN lay out there he must be well hidden, thought Abner. But, then, Bill would be; there wasn't a better hunter or shot in the county than Bill. He could easily be lying out there among the oak and blackjack, a mean little eye glittering along his rifle barrel. Lying patiently, waiting for Abner to step out of the schoolhouse door.

Bill had said plainly and loudly that he would put a bullet in Abner's guts for stealing his girl. Everybody knew that Bill was mean enough to

do it and everybody expected him to carry out his threat. The general opinion was that it was a shame for Bill to murder the teacher, teachers being as scarce as they were; then, too, nearly all were in favor of the lean Abner but nobody said so where Bill could get hold of it.

Abner had wished a hundred times yesterday and today that he hadn't gone to the dance night before last, but school teachers had a certain social obligation they could hardly avoid. The Big Caney dance was a social event and Bill Griffin had brought Mary Allen. He'd got drunk and quarrelsome as usual. There had been a fight with a little shooting, but luckily no one was hurt. Mary had been scared like the other womenfolks and had asked Abner to take her home. The rosy-cheeked Mary was the subject of many of Abner's dreams and he had been only too glad to oblige. She lived right near the Howells where Abner boarded.

Abner had gone with Mary a time or two until Bill stepped in. Mary had been afraid not to go with him and old man Allen had been afraid to refuse him permission, not that Bill asked him, of course. But Mary knew what would happen to the farm building or the cattle or some of them and Allen did too. Mary had told Abner all this on the way home; it was only what everyone had known all along but it meant having to kill Bill or be killed to cross him up in it. Abner made small talk to Mary but inside he was boiling with a killing rage, he'd about stood for more than enough from Bill Griffin.

Abner knew that if he'd had his gun that night he'd have killed Bill. Griffin and two of his cronies overtook them before they reached the Allen place and Bill had fired twice at them, narrowly missing Mary. Bill's two cronies dragged him away cursing and screaming threats. Bill had elaborated on the curses and threats yesterday when he'd been sober. Abner knew that Bill would try to kill him.

YESTERDAY Abner had dug the Colt out of his duffle and reloaded it with fresh caps and powder and strapped it under his coat. He tightened his lips now when he remembered the savage surge of blood that had rushed through him when he'd balanced the long-barreled gun in his hand.

Abner eased open the schoolhouse door and slid through. His heart thumped and his flesh shrank from the expected feel of a bullet. But none came and he made the ravine that ran on the edge of the school ground. He breathed easier and felt comparatively safe. But he would exercise the precaution of taking the long way around to the Howells. Bill might be lying along the trail.

Darkness was less than an hour away when Abner threaded his way through the scrub oak thicket and came out near the Howell back yard. His alert eyes swept the log house and barn. No one in sight. That was strange as Howell should have been doing the night chores. Abner slid the Colt out of its holster and cautiously circled the house. He saw Howell and his wife on the porch, they were uneasy and looking toward the barn. Abner studied them a moment then tensed as he made out another figure in the doorway.

The figure in the door stepped out and Abner relaxed. It was Mary Allen. She had been crying he saw by her streaked face and red eyes, but she stood now with the Howells looking toward the barn, eyes dark with dread.

"Hello," said Abner.

The three whipped around startled, frightened. Mary and Mrs Howell cried out.

"Abner!" cried Mary, and flung herself at him.

Abner held the hysterical girl in his arms. She clung tightly, trembling violently. Mrs Howell was tugging at his coat; Howell cursed in vast relief.

"WHAT'S up?" asked Abner. But he figured he knew.

"Lord A'mighty, Abner," yelled Howell, "we thought he'd got you!"

"Abner! Oh, Abner, you're safe!" cried Mary.

"Lord A'mighty!" yelled Howell.

"Somebody calm down and tell me what happened!" roared Abner.

They all started talking at once but Howell out-yelled them and got the women quiet. "It's Bill Griffin, Abner, he's after you. He went to the schoolhouse, I guess."

"You mean he's laying for me between here and the school?"

"Yes! Yes, Abner," cried Mary. "You've got to hurry and get out of here before he comes back!"

Mrs Howell screamed. "Look! There he is by the barn!" "Run, Abner!" wailed Mary.

"Quick! In the house," snapped Abner, pushing Mary.

Howell, cursing, dragged his wife inside. Abner shoved the hysterical Mary in. He whipped a glance toward the barn and saw Bill standing by the corral water trough, rifle ready.

"Howell, bolt the door!" yelled Abner as he gave Mary a final shove. He leaped around the corner of the cabin as a bullet smacked the log by his head.

Abner calmly drew the Colt and inspected the caps. His first excitement had passed leaving him calm and coldly angry. He looked around carefully, it wouldn't do to look around the corner of the cabin, Bill's mean little eyes would be glued there waiting.

The logs would protect the folks inside, thought Abner, so there was no point in deserting the excellent cover it afforded. He picked up a small chunk of wood and eased it up to the corner. Instantly a bullet knocked it flying. Abner quickly stole a glance around and saw the smoke from the shot rising above the water trough. He wished for a rifle, that would make Bill desert the trough quick enough, but the pistol would have no effect on the heavy wood. He fired a quick shot and heard it thud into the trough. Abner smiled grimly with savage pleasure; he'd have to trick Bill.

In long strides he made the other corner of the cabin out of Bill's range of vision and grasping the projecting log ends, he scrambled to the roof. He removed his boots and dropped them to the ground. Then in his socks he eased to the top. He peered cautiously from behind the chimney. He smiled again, his lips a merciless line. In the gathering darkness he could see the top of Bill's head over the trough.

A savage surge of blood tightened Abner's muscles as he drew the Colt from its holster and eased its long barrel over the roof top. He aligned the sight on the top of Bill's head and gently took the slack from the trigger.

"Bill!"

Bill started, then steadied his rifle on the corner of the cabin. Abner could see his lips pull back from his teeth. He snuggled the stock against his cheek ready for Abner's head to appear.

Abner squeezed the trigger. With the report he plainly heard the thud as the bullet struck its mark. Bill leaped up then fell over the trough. Abner methodically shot him twice more. Bill lay still, his rifle leaning against the trough.

Abner made his way down and pulled on his boots and strode to the trough. He stared down at the body of Bill Griffin.

"Damn you, you made me do it finally, didn't you?" He drove his boot in the unfeeling ribs. "You damn bully."

"Lord A'mighty, Abner! Don't do that, he's dead!" Howell was pulling at his arm.

Only then was Abner aware of Howell's presence. He stared dully at Howell's agitated face. The women stood some distance away staring with wide, horror-filled eyes.

"He made a killer out of me," said Abner dully. "I knew it'd happen sometime. Now I'm a killer."

"Tain't that, Abner—I'll tell the law how it was."

"That won't help; I've done it once, now—I'll do it again." Abner sat down on the trough. "I'll ride . . . west. Will you saddle my horse, Howell?"

"All right, Abner," said Howell looking at Abner strangely. "Lord A'mighty!" he muttered as he started for the barn.

The two outlaws were fogging down the street.

HORSE - THIEF

By Chuck Martin

It was just a plumb natural mistake when Gale Thompson grabbed the sheriff's hoss, but how could he prove it?

GALE THOMPSON sighed as he turned away from the Faro layout in the Post Oak saloon, which had relieved him of two months pay in exactly one hour. Cal Corbin of the C Bar C offered to advance his top buckaroo a month's pay, but the cowboy grinned and shook his head.

"Thanks, Boss, but that Dealer has me rabbit-footed," he refused the loan. "I might as well get on back to the spread and start stompin' out that bunch of broncs the boys drove into the breaking pens."

The blast from a sawed-off shotgun out in the street sent both men racing for the swinging front doors. A horse screamed at the tie-rail, and was dying in a welter of blood when Thompson and the old cattleman reached the dusty street.

"It's your Ginger hoss," Corbin whispered hoarsely. "There's a gun-ruckus down at the corner near the bank!"

Gale Thompson knuckled a tear from his slate-colored eyes as his personal horse gave up the fight for life. Two racing horsemen were leaving town fast, and hitting their mounts with the rowels as a third man stood in the street with a blazing six-shooter in each hand.

"One of them two," Thompson said bleakly, and his hand missed his gun

when he stabbed for the weapon. "Can I borrow your horse, Cal?"

Cal Corbin glanced at the dead horse and nodded. "Take that big bay of mine, Gale," he said grimly. "You ought to catch up with them two this side of Wolf Creek."

Thompson whirled like a cat and made a bow-legged run for the corral behind the saloon. He was six feet tall and lathy thin, with the wide square shoulders and narrow hips of the born buckaroo. He pulled the slip-knot which tied a rangy bay to the bars, vaulted to the saddle, and took out after the bandits in a dead run. Now the shaking anger had left him, but cold fury hardened his fighting face.

"That was Buckshot Farrel," he muttered savagely. "I'll get that murdering hoss-killer, or ride the ghost trail with Ginger."

Only a cowboy could understand the grief in his heart for the horse which had carried him for five years in his saddle-trampings. Old Cal Corbin understood, and he was trying to explain to sheriff Ed Blaine who was accusing Thompson of cow-country's most heinous crime.

"Gale made a mistake, sheriff," Corbin said earnestly. "He asked for the lend of my bay, but he took your hoss by mistake. He's fighting mad because those bank robbers killed his own personal hoss!"

"Mistake, hell!" Blaine burst out. "That Red hoss is tops in my saddle-string, and the fastest cayuse in these parts. This bronc-stomper of yours is in cahoots with those outlaws, and he's riding out for his split of the loot!"

"Not Gale Thompson, sheriff," Corbin contradicted earnestly. "Buckshot Farrel shot Gale's hoss with that murdering scatter-gun of his, and right now Gale is helping you do your lawwork!"

"I don't need any help!" Blaine shouted. "I'll get that hossthief if it takes me the rest of my term. And you're riding with me as part of my posse. Jump one of those cayuses and keep close to me!"

* * *

GALE THOMPSON reined in his steaming mount to a stop at the top of a hog-back which looked down into Mule Valley. He could see the ribbon of silver that marked Wolf Creek, and his eyes were slits of smoldering fire as he watched the break in the alders where the two bank robbers had disappeared. His left hand strayed down to pet the neck of the bay as his voice crooned softly.

"Blow a spell, Red hoss. I know a short-cut where that crick makes the big bend, and mebbe so we can square up for Ginger!"

His voice ended in a croak when his throat tightened. He had raised the bay from a colt, and the borrowed horse between his knees was much like Ginger. Almost as fast as Ginger had been, and he'd either square up for his pard or go to hell with his boots on!

Thompson drew his long-barreled .45 and checked the loads with steady fingers. He snugged the weapon back in his holster and gigged the bay into a trail cutting away from the creek.

"Buckshot Farrel and Bill Tansy," he muttered. "The dirty hoss-killin' sons!"

The bay under him whinnied softly and slid through the buckbrush like a slick-eared maverick. Thompson swallowed a lump in his throat and rode in silence. He could talk to a horse where speech would be impossible to another man, and he had said all there was to say.

Bred in the high mesa country where one cowboy never lays hands on another man's personal mount, Ginger had never been topped off by any man except his master. They had ridden the wild trails for five years, and now Ginger was dead with a double charge of buckshot through his courageous heart.

Thompson turned up a steep trail where the brush thinned out some, near a little clearing overlooking the creek. The brush-tops waved slightly down below, and Thompson knew that he was in front of the bank robbers. A brush-popping cowboy learns to read every sign, and he lives by an inviolate law.

You ate everything you put on your plate, and you let another man's gear alone. You fought for the brand that paid you your wages, and you never touched another man's personal horse.

"Get along, Red," Thompson whispered to the bay, and they started down the trail. A man who would kill a horse was worse than a murderer, and one was coming through the alders fringing Wolf Creek.

* * *

BUCKSHOT FARREL checked his gelding with the curb bit and grinned at his lanky companion. Barn-shouldered and squat of stature, with a red stubble of beard covering his beefy tanned face. He had little blue eyes under heavy red brows that beetled to a slant to touch across the bridge of a bulbous nose. Yellow dog-teeth in the corners of his loose mouth which gleamed like fangs when his lips split in a wolfish grin.

"That was the sheriff's hoss I downed back yonder in town," he told Bill Tansy. "They ain't no sign of a posse on the back-trail on account of Ed Blaine crying over his cayuse!"

Bill Tansy was six feet tall with powerful stooping shoulders. He had the gray eyes of a killer in his long bony face, and he wore the crossed belts of the two-gun man. He shook his head slowly as the horses stopped to drink just below Thompson's hiding place.

"You shouldn't have did 'er, Buckshot," Tansy stated slowly. "Shootin' a man's personal hoss is worse than robbin' a dinky bank. That jigger will crowd us clear to hell and halfway back unless I misread the signs."

"Him," Farrel sneered, and then he grinned. "We got four thousand in that stick-up, and there's a good place for a bushwhack trap right up ahead. We can hole up there and rub out that sheriff when he comes fiddle-footin' across the crick on a borrowed hoss!"

"Kill Ed Blaine?" Tansy repeated, and shook his head. "Looks to me like you are going out of your way to make us trouble, Farrel!"

"Saving us trouble," Farrel corrected, swinging around in the saddle. "Ed Blaine ain't never known to leave a trail once he starts out to ride gun-sign. He ain't noted for taking prisoners, which is how I come to down his hoss. I aim to do the same for him when he comes faunchin' round that bend yonderly, after which we can take our time getting back to our hide-out!"

Gale Thompson listened to the buzz of talk, and he held the nose of his borrowed horse to prevent a warning whinny. His right hand tightened around the grips of his gun, and he closed his eyes until a spasm of anger had passed to leave him once more in control of his trained muscles.

Two horses came into view and stopped near the heavy brush screen. Bill Tansy slid to the ground and loosened his latigo strap. Buckshot Farrel sat his saddle with the sawed-off shotgun in the scabbard under his left leg. Both outlaws were caught flat-footed when a deep voice rasped the stick-up order.

"Elevate your gun-hooks pronto!"

Thompson stepped into the clear as he spoke, and he acted like a man who knows exactly what will happen.

Buckshot Farrel shoved both hands high into the air as though they had been pulled by the same string. He knew all the tricks, but he also knew when his hand was beaten.

Bill Tansy jerked up his head and saw the tall buckaroo step from cover. Tansy's horse was between himself and Thompson, and the outlaw was wanted in three States for murder. He might have a chance when his horse jumped, and Tansy got set to match his draw against Gale Thompson's drop.

Thompson's slitted eyes were like ice-glare as he stared at the cornered outlaws. He saw the shoulder-twitch when Tansy went for his gun, and Thompson's thumb dropped the hammer just as Tansy's gun cleared leather.

The horse boogered when Thompson's gun roared into flame, went stampeding down the back-trail with stirrups banging against its ribs. Gale Thompson eared back his ham-

mer as the heavy gun bucked high in his hand on the recoil.

Bill Tansy was standing spread-legged with a little black hole squarely between his eyes. His fingers opened slowly to drop his gun which was smothered in the grass-roots when the tall outlaw pitched forward to measure his length. The long legs stretched out with the toes of Tansy's boots rattling out a muffled tattoo.

Gale Thompson caught his sights and watched the mean face of Buckshot Farrel at the same time. His voice was low and grim as he left the decision to the outlaw.

He took a chance. "You?"

Farrel shrugged and shook his head. "I don't booger easy," he grunted. "For why you ridin' gun-sign on me and Tansy? I never saw you before in my life!"

THERE was no excitement in his deep growling voice; no tremor in his up-stretched stubby hands. Only his little blue eyes glowed with killer-light to tell of the murderous rage in his heart.

Gale Thompson stared at the brutal face for a long time as he held his breath against his straining lungs. His voice was husky with determination when he finally spoke.

"I'm giving you a chance, you hoss-killin' son! Ginger was the best trail-pard a waddy ever had, and you blew his heart out when you fogged it past the Post Oak saloon. You better talk fast if you've got anything to say before you fill your hand!"

Buckshot Farrel returned the stare, and he whistled thinly through his teeth.

"You mean to say that bay hoss at the tie-rail belonged to you?" he asked softly.

Gale Thompson began to tremble with the effort he was making to control the blinding anger that swept over him like a flood. He wanted to slip the gnurled hammer under his calloused thumb; wanted to shoot the hoss-killer in the middle and watch him bleed out slowly the way Ginger had died.

"You went out of your way to kill my hoss," Thompson's voice croaked through dry tight lips. "I ought to shoot you down like the mad lobo that you are!"

Buckshot Farrel knew the law of the range. His little eyes focused to pinpoints of brilliance; his powerful shoulders hunched forward in a crouch. He had killed a cowboy's horse, and nothing less than his own demise would satisfy the tall, grieving cowboy who had tracked him down to sqaure up for his saddle-pard.

"I didn't know you, hombre, but you said something about a chance," Farrel said slowly. "What kind of a chance you got in mind?"

"I'm Gale Thompson of the C Bar C," the buckaroo answered harshly, and the tremble left his hands when he saw Farrel set his muscles. "Just make that jump if you feel lucky," he challenged.

Farrel sighed and stretched the spring from his shoulders. His eyes wandered briefly to the stiffening form of Bill Tansy, and he slowly shook his bullet head. The fingers of his stubby hands began to claw like talons. Talons curved to fit the handles of his belt gun.

"You're dealing," he remarked softly, so as not to set off taut nerves. "That chance you mentioned?"

Gale Thompson set his jaw and straightened slowly. His right arm moved smoothly with his brown hand flipping his gun into scabbard-leather while his thumb lowered the hammer. His deep voice was like a rat-tail file when he announced the deal, and it spelled. . .Showdown!

"You killed the best trail-pard a man ever had, Farrel. You aimed to drygulch the sheriff when he came riding around the bend. Fill your hand, you hoss-killing buscadero!"

BUCKSHOT FARREL swelled his big chest and balanced on the high heels of his scarred boots. His lips parted in a grin to show the yellow dog-teeth at the corners of his loose mouth. Both hands lowered slowly to hook thumbs in the shell-studded cartridge belt, and then the outlaw played the cards he had received on the deal. He wasted no words to postpone the inevitable.

Farrel twitched his right shoulder

to plunge his taloned hand down to the gun on his leather-clad leg. Stubby fingers wrapped around the handle and flipped the gun up without a pause. Killer-light blazed from the slitted lids of his little eyes just before the lightning struck.

Thompson made his draw with his thumb rocking back the hammer when his gun slid across the lip of his worn holster. A double explosion blasted the late afternoon stillness with only a stutter of sound to space the two shots, but that stutter meant that the loser had shot. . .second!

Buckshot Farrel took a slug through the right shoulder and jerked around in a spin. He caught his balance and teetered on his heels, and when he swung around to face Thompson, a banner of crimson flagged out in the folds of his dirty gray shirt.

Gale Thompson jabbed with his smoking gun, but held the slipping hammer under his thumb. The flaming light of battle burned fiercely in his slate-colored eyes until Buckshot Farrel swayed forward too far and crashed down to measure his length.

Thompson threw back his head and screamed the victory song of a hunting cougar which has made a kill, and the unearthly scream brought the light of reason back to his wide staring eyes.

"I squared up for you, Ginger hoss," he murmured softly, and his hand moved with swift sureness to holster the powder-grimed gun. The quietness beat down upon his ears after the furious blasts of battle.

"Get them hands high, cowboy!"

Gale Thompson jerked up his head to listen, and he recognized the note of authority in the rough voice behind him. He raised both hands slowly before he turned to face sheriff Ed Blaine who was watching him from behind a Colt .45, and it eared back to go. Thompson shrugged his shoulders and nodded his head.

"I shot them two," he admitted quietly. "I'd like to keep my gun when we ride back through town."

"Hear me careful, cowboy," the sheriff said sternly. "You know range-law without any telling from me, and the charge is horse-stealing!"

Thompson jerked like a spirited horse under the lash. The mad glare returned to his eyes as he answered the law.

"You're a liar, sher'ff! I never stole a hoss in all my sinful life!"

A ruddy flush stained the grizzled officer's bronzed face while the gun in his hand jabbed forward.

"Keep 'em up!" he roared. "The man don't live who can pass me the lie!"

Gale Thompson stiffened and clenched his fists. He had given a horse-killer a chance, and he'd make one for himself.

"I'll square with you, law-man," he said slowly. "You'll eat crow about me stealing a hoss!"

"Jump, you ringy son!" the sheriff taunted grmily, as Thompson dug holes for his heels, and set his muscles. "They ain't but one way to rod law for a hoss thief!"

THOMPSON relaxed as he stared over the angry sheriff's shoulder. Ed Blaine gave a start when a bay horse came out of the brush and nudged him with a soft muzzle. Gale Thompson sucked in a deep breath as he stared at the sweating horse he had borrowed, and then he veiled his eyes so as not to betray the fact that he had seen the brush sway off to the left.

"Old Cal Corbin gave me the lend of that bay," Thompson heard himself explaining gruffly. "Because Buckshot Farrel shot my Ginger hoss through the heart!"

"Hold 'er so," the sheriff warned, and the expression changed on his stern fearless face. "Being a cowhand, mebbe you can read the brand on that bay's off shoulder. You mind reading the sign out loud so's we can both hear?"

Thompson flicked his eyes to the bay's shoulder and focused in a stare of bewilderment. "Rafter B," he whispered. "Old Cal burns his stock with the C Bar C iron!"

Sheriff Blaine nodded his iron-gray head. "That's whatever," he agreed. "You grabbed my personal horse to leave me afoot right when I needed him to take me after them

outlaws who robbed the bank. The charge is still hoss-stealing!"

Thompson shook his head and lowered his eyes to hide some of the misery he felt. The bay muzzled the sheriff's shoulder affectionately, just the way Ginger used to muzzle Thompson's shoulder after a long hard ride.

"Sorry I called you out of your name, sher'ff," Thompson said in a husky whisper. "She was a mistake, but like you said, I done stole your personal hoss!"

Ed Blaine stepped back and lowered his old Peacemaker Colt as Cal Corbin pushed through the brush leading another rangy bay horse. Thompson stared at the two animals; noted the C Bar C on the horse Corbin was leading.

"I never stole a hoss before in my life, and I never gave up my gun," he said to himself, and then he raised his hands as he turned to Blaine. "Take my smoke-pole, sher'ff!"

ED BLAINE turned sidewise and holstered his gun as a smile changed his hard fighting face. He studied Cal Corbin for a moment, squared his shoulders, and spoke to Thompson.

"Keep your gun, cowboy. I'll double your riding pay in case you'd like to rub stirrups with me and help rod the law. Think it over."

"And me a hoss thief?" Thompson demanded in a whisper, as though he didn't believe what he had heard.

"Gwan," Blaine retorted irritably. "I saw Buckshot Farrel turn his scatter-gun loose and kill your Ginger hoss. He thought it was mine, and he knew I'd take right out after him and his pard for robbing the bank. They got four thousand in cash, and there's a reward of a thousand apiece for them. . .dead or alive!"

"Whyn't you kill me?" a hoarse voice shouted, and Buckshot Farrel pushed up to his feet.

"Because I'm saving a new rope to make you a necktie," Sheriff Blaine barked at the outlaw. "You're lucky it wasn't me who beat you to the gun, because I don't throw off my shots!"

Cal Corbin stepped up to Thompson and touched him on the arm. He studied the buckaroo's face intently and then made a proposition of his own.

"I'll double your pay my ownself, Gale," he offered. "I'm needing a ramrod on the C Bar C, and you can take your choice of any hoss on the spread. She's Dealer's choice, cowboy, and this ain't Faro. What you say?"

Gale Thompson turned slowly, and he was unable to find words. His eyes studied the toes of his scuffed boots, and then he drew a deep breath.

"I'll take the job on the C Bar C, old-timer," he told Corbin, and a happy smile spread over his face as he turned to Blaine. "About those rewards, sher'ff," he began haltingly, "I never took a bounty, but I'd like to wipe the slate clean about that hoss-stealing charge. This Red hoss of yours is an awful lot like my Ginger hoss. I'll swap you evens for the rewards, and you can put the money in the Widows fund after you pay yourself for Big Red."

Ed Blaine began to shrug nervously. The bay horse minced up to Thompson and muzzled the buckaroo's shoulder. The sheriff stepped forward and gripped Thompson's right hand hard.

"I know how you feel, cowboy," he said roughly. "She's a swap, and you've bought a hoss. I'll put the reward money in the fund for the widows of Peace Officers. And I'll tell the world that you ain't a. . . Horse Thief!"

COMING NEXT ISSUE

A "Judge Bates" Novel by Lee Floren

GUNS OF POST-HOLE VALLEY

"Had To Murder a Helpless Kid, eh?" Taunted Hanlon

ONE CANDIDATE
For Sheriff

By C. C. Staples

When Mike Peters brought back young Len Brady, dead, without the money that was stolen, Peters' rival candidate for sheriff had Mike where he wanted him!

TALL, black-haired young Sheriff Mike Peters loomed high and straight in his saddle, as he came loping down the main street of Bentley, while the morning shadows still stretched long on the deep dust.

He pulled up in front of the one-story 'dobe jail, tossed his reins over the hitch rack and lowered his big, broad-shouldered frame to the street. Mike strode quickly down to Royal Hanlon's Star Saloon. Outside, he paused for a minute, absentmindedly hitching his crossed gun belts up over lean, narrow hips. His hand rose and his long gunfighter's forefinger and thumb stroked his craggy chin in a gesture that was completely characteristic of him when he faced a problem. He couldn't tell why he made that gesture. . .but there it was.

Mike had had a long ride that morning and felt the need of a drink. But he and Hanlon were not on the best of terms. He still hesitated mo-

mentarily, and then abruptly he shrugged, pushed the bat wings aside and made for the bar. He could have gone farther down the street to another saloon. But that was not Mike Peters' way; he was one law-man who believed in meeting an enemy more than half way.

As he gave his order, silence ran over the men sitting at tables in the place. Five of Hanlon's gun hands quietly pushed back their chairs, hitched up their gun belts and strolled to different points in the big room. At these points they put their backs against the walls and stood watching the Sheriff. It looked like trouble. Or maybe they were just playing safe; time would tell.

Then, seventeen-year-old Len Brady looked up from his game of solitaire, surprise plain on his fuzzy, boyish face. He forced a scowl, jumped up and took his stand at the end of the bar nearest Mike Peters. The kid was skinny, awkward, not yet filled out to man's stature and the heroes of his youthful mind were the tough, cold-eyed gun-slingers of Hanlon's gang.

Royal Hanlon, a slender, meticulously dressed man, came suddenly out of his office, which faced a short corridor at the back of the saloon. He stood just inside the room for a minute and patted the top of his furry 'stove-pipe' hat that he always wore, settling it firmly on his blonde head. His frosty, pale, blue eyes ran quickly over the place. What he saw seemed to satisfy him. A cold smile spread over the dark, rather handsome face of the gambler and he strolled toward the Sheriff. "Peters, you're not wanted here," he snapped. "Get out!"

MIKE paid no attention to him, but reached for the bottle that the bar-keep had set out. Hanlon growled, "Buck! Put that bottle back." The bar-keep, surprised, snatched it and stood it in the rack.

Mike Peters turned around slowly and said, "What's eatin' you, Hanlon? Get out of the wrong side of the bed this morning? Way I see it, this is a public place and you can't refuse to sell any man a drink." He spoke calmly, but his steady, gray eyes missed no detail of the deadly set-up in this place.

His quarrel with Royal Hanlon dated back more than a year, when the Sheriff had uncovered and broken up a very lucrative smuggling layout, operated by Hanlon's gang. At the time Mike felt dead certain that Hanlon was behind the whole business, but he had been unable to make a case against the shrewd gambler. Royal Hanlon had sworn to get even, and the news of this threat had leaked out to Mike.

"Well, what are you waiting for, tin star?" Hanlon growled. "Come on. Get out before my boys hurt you. You'll get no drink here." He came close to the Sheriff.

Young Len Brady suddenly jumped away from the end of the bar. "Aw, why don't yuh shoot the sneakin' skunk, right now?" he shouted. His skinny hand trembled on the butt of his six-gun.

Royal Hanlon wheeled on him. "Shut up, kid," he snapped. "I've told you before, some day you'll talk out of turn just once too often. Go on. Get out of my way."

Mike Peters was facing the gambler, leaning against the bar. The trace of a quizzical grin was in his eyes. His left hand came up slowly, his thumb and finger rubbed his chin thoughtfully for a moment. His grin broadened. "Can't forget the time I smashed your little smuggling game, out of your craw, can yuh, Hanlon? For a gambler, you're a damn poor loser; a bum sport."

Hanlon's dark face reddened. His fingers twitched over his gun. He turned his head, motioned. The five tough, two-gun men pushed their shoulders away from the walls and converged on Mike Peters with a casualness that was a big overdone. Their thumbs were hooked into their crossed belts, handy to their guns. Their cold eyes never left Mike for an instant.

Hanlon glanced quickly over the room once more. Peters was the only outsider in the place at this time of the morning. Fifteen feet distant,

the five gun hawks halted, stood ready.

Mike still leaned against the bar. He looked relaxed, at ease. There was still that quizzical half smile on his face. Then suddenly, his long right arm shot out, his fingers fastened in Hanlon's collar, he jerked the gambler over in front of him, shoved a gun in his back. The move was so unexpected that the gunmen were taken completely by surprise and stood uncertain, their guns half clearing leather.

THE bar-keep, Buck Easton had ducked until just his eyes showed above the bar. "All right, Buck," Mike said calmly, "I'll take that drink now. Pour it out and put it on the bar." The Sheriff tossed off his liquor and threw a coin on the bar. "Now, Hanlon," he said, "Come with me."

"Damn you, Peters! You win this time," Royal Hanlon growled, infuriated. "But things are going to change a lot around here next week. After the election, when I'm sheriff, I'll make it so hot for you that you'll be glad to pull stakes out of here."

"So you're going to be sheriff, huh? Tough break for ol' Cochise County. I'd hate to see the folks get a dirty deal like that, and I aim to prevent it. I say you're not going to be sheriff." Mike backed to the door, dragging the gambler with him.

The bat wings pushed half open, he paused. "Reckon I ought to jail you, Royal," he said slowly. "But you've made this a personal fight. Besides, I'd hate to spend the county's money to feed a rat like you." He gave the gambler a quick shove, sending him to his knees in the saloon, jumped outside and put his back to the wall.

Blue Eagle, tall, thin, hawk-beaked and one of the best trackers in Arizona, was squatting on the porch, his blanket over his shoulders when Mike leaped out. There was a strip of bleached corn shuck behind his left ear. He grunted at Mike. His glance flashed to another strip of corn shuck in the Sheriff's left breast pocket and the trace of a grim smile fled across his sober face. Months before, the brave had put that Indian good luck fetish there, as a gesture of friendship. But the Apache wanted no part of these pale-face fights. He turned and strode up the street. The way he looked at it, a man was a fool to give an enemy any chance to kill him, as these pale-faces did. His philosophy was very simple and direct: a man had an enemy. Therefore he killed him before he, himself got killed.

Ten minutes later, Mike Peters was seated at his desk in Bentley's 'dobe jail. He had just lighted a cigar and his spurs were hooked comfortably into the half-open top drawer of the desk when gray-mustached, paunchy old Judge Arnold Dent came in quickly out of the hot Arizona sun. He carefully removed the ridiculous, hard hat that he always wore, placed it gently on the desk and stood mopping his head with a red bandanna. Mike told him what had happened in the Star Saloon. The Judge listened carefully, grunted.

"Mike," he said, a wheeze in his fat throat, "You don't seem to realize how strong Hanlon has made himself in other parts of the county. Things have been too easy for you, the past years—getting elected and re-elected time after time without anybody coming up against you. Hanlon's been throwing money around like water in Two Arrows and Hondo and those places. Folks over there are beginning to think the skunk is a fine feller."

"Aw, they'll get smart about 'im, all right. Nobody in Arizona really trusts a tinhorn. You know that."

"Now, don't you fool yourself. And if you're counting on being re-elected, getting mixed up in a fight with him is the worst thing you can do. It'll turn them folks in the western part of the county against you, for sure. They'll say right away, you're looking for a chance to get 'im, because you're afraid he'll beat you on election day."

Mike grunted. "Well, sure I'm countin' on being re-elected," he said. For a time there was silence in the office, each of them busy with his own thoughts. They looked up and nodded as white-haired, skinny old

man Willis, the express agent, passed the door and crossed the street to his office to open up for the day.

TEN minutes later, Willis staggered from the front door of the express office, his white hair matted with blood and started to yell, "Help! I been robbed! Five thousand dollars gone. Catch 'im."

Mike Peters leaped from his chair, ran out onto the porch. As he cleared the door, a horse and rider came at a full run from between the express office and Ah Lim's restaurant, directly across the way. It was young Len Brady. He wheeled his horse and cut out down Main Street at top speed, yelling at every jump.

Mike ran for his horse, leaped to the saddle and swung away after the kid. The boy already had a lead of a block. Suddenly he twisted in his saddle and fired a shot at the Sheriff. Mike let go one shot over his head, and the kid swung sharply off the street to the cover of the buildings. He cut in between the blacksmith shop and Royal Hanlon's Star Saloon.

Mike Peters touched his big roan gelding with steel and kept straight on down Main Street. He was close behind the kid when they hit out into the foothills of the Whetstones.

Back in town a few riders started for their horses, then gave up the idea and went with the crowd to question old man Willis. After all, they reasoned, it was only a seventeen-year-old boy the Sheriff was after. He'd bring him in, in no time. Most of them laughed at the idea of the kid getting away from Sheriff Mike.

But, an hour later, it came as a distinct shock to the crowd still hanging around the express office, when they spotted Sheriff Peters coming slowly down Main Street, leading the kid's horse. There wasn't a sound from the men gathered on the sidewalk watching the slow, shuffling progress of the two horses, the downcast, regretful attitude of their sheriff. There was a limp form, face downward across Len Brady's saddle.

Mike pulled up across the street in front of the jail and stepped down. His face was serious and his shoulders slumped dejectedly.

Judge Dent hurried over from the express office, took one look and turned to Mike Peters. In the hush that had come over the crowd, Dent wheezed, "My Lord, Mike! What happened? Couldn't you have taken the boy without killing 'im? After all, he was only a kid. I don't see. . . ."

Peters raised a hand in a weary gesture. "I never hated anything so much in my life," he groaned, "but the kid rushed me from the cub bank of Rattlesnake canyon. He was close, and blazing at me and cursing at every jump. It was me or him. I tried to drill 'im in the shoulder, but he was on a run, dodging, and. . . ." He waved a hand at the limp form lashed to the saddle. "That's what comes of a kid keeping bad company," he said. "Hanlon's tough gun hawks were his Gods. He was just doing what he thought they'd do."

He turned to a man in the crowd. "Take the kid to the undertaking shack," he directed. "Tell Doc Wilbur I'll pay. I want the best there is for the poor kid."

ROYAL HANLON and two of his gang, Slim Devlin and Jed Arn had come hurrying up the street in time to hear Mike's story of his meeting with the kid. Royal patted the top of his tall hat, pushed it down firmly. "This is a hell of a thing for a sheriff to do; going around murdering helpless kids," he sneered. "It's high time the people of Cochise County made a change. I can promise you, things will be different after election day. There'll be no more of this cold-blooded murder when I'm sheriff of this county."

Mike Peters' head came up sharply. He hesitated, his gray eyes steady on Hanlon, over the heads of the crowd. Then he started for the gambler.

Judge Dent and a half dozen others standing nearest to him, grabbed Mike and held him. "Not now, Mike," the Judge wheezed. "There's been enough done today."

Old man Willis, a reddened bandage about his head, cut in, "Mike, if

you'll just give me the sack of coin the kid took, I'll put it in the safe."

Peters turned and stared for a moment, as if he didn't quite understand. "That's the queer part of this whole damned thing," he got out at last. "The boy didn't have nothing on him when I got 'im. I searched careful, all round that part of the canyon. There was no sign—nothing."

Hanlon laughed sarcastically and turned to one of his men, light-haired, bony-faced Slim Devlin. "Hear that, Slim? Ain't satisfied with murdering the kid, but on top of that he tries to cram this yarn down our throats. A fine sheriff."

Mike Peters scowled. "I'll kill you for that, Hanlon. Nobody calls me a thief and murderer and gets away with it."

Judge Dent and the group around him hustled Mike into the jail office, despite his struggles. "Don't pay any attention, Mike," the judge wheezed. "That's what Hanlon wants."

Muttered talk ran over the crowd and they began to drift away. Old man Willis stood silent, looking thoughtfully at the sheriff, his faded old eyes unreadable. Then, without a word he turned and went slowly across the street to his office.

Mike was raging, but the men with him at last quieted him. A few minutes later, he saw Willis and a group of cattlemen mount up and head out of town at a lope. Blue Eagle, the Apache tracker rode at the head of the little group. Mike watched them hopefully until they left the street and turned into the foothills of the Whetstone Mountains, toward Rattlesnake canyon. He was calmer now, and the men who had hurried him into his office, left and walked up the street.

Judge Dent pushed his hard hat back on his head. "Now, Mike, you see what that skunk Royal Hanlon is doing to your chances for election," he said, in his throaty wheeze. "He's got the west side of the county about corraled. And this unlucky business about the kid, and that money disappearing, is bound to set folks here a-talking. I tell you, boy . . ."

"Judge, right now I don't give a damn if I don't get elected. I'll be glad to get rid of the cussed job. That poor, misguided kid. . . ." Mike's voice was bitter, desperate.

"But you got to think about the decent folks in this county, boy. They're depending on you. You just gotta! You know what will happen, danged well, if that smugglin', crooked Hanlon gets in, with them gun hawks of his to back his play. That's all he's running for."

"Guess you're right Judge, after all. And I give you my word, I'll uncover that tinhorn's crookedness for all to see, before election day. But if that skunk ain't too yellow to fight, I'll settle this whole shebang with my guns before long. I've stood enough from Hanlon. I'll kill 'im, that's all. A Sheriff's badge ain't a license for a dirty crook to make that kind of talk and not get what's coming to him."

Judge Dent looked at him sharply for a moment, then shrugged, cleared his throat noisily. "All right, Mike," he said slowly. "I ain't like the feller that can't back your play."

"Good ol' Dent," Mike said, his thumb and finger moving to his chin, thoughtfully, a crooked, whimsical grin building up on his face. He reamed to the window and stood looking off toward Rattlesnake Canyon.

THE JUDGE was not one to neglect his groceries and presently he stood up, pulled his vest down over his round paunch, set his hard hat firmly on his head and said, "Long past noon, Mike. Let's me and you mosey over to the hotel and put on the feed bag."

"Might as well, I reckon. Ain't hungry, but I'll drink some coffee with you."

The two men had finished a leisurely meal and were seated in the jail office, their cigars going when old man Willis and his party came slowly down the street from the Whetstone Mountains. Mike went out on the porch as they dismounted. Willis saw him, slowly shook his head and went on into his office. Blue Eagle shuffled across the street at Mike's beckoning wave.

Mike gave the brave a dollar for his dinner and asked, "See any sign?"

"No. Me no see sign. Boy no have money when go to Rattlesnake Canyon."

"But he must have had it," Mike protested. "He had it in an Express money sack in his near saddle bag when he left the express office. Ah Lim saw 'im from his restaurant."

Blue Eagle drew himself up to his full six feet and threw his blanket over his shoulder. His black eyes flashed as he said, "No! Me read-um sign!" He made for Ah Lim's restaurant abruptly.

Mike watched him for a moment, his hand picking at that corn husk fetish in his breast pocket, then went slowly inside again and sat down at his desk. He picked up a pencil and paper, as though he could figure a way out of all his trouble with it. There was a thoughtful look in his steady gray eyes, his finger and thumb almost motionless on his chin, his eyes half closed. Outside, shadows were heavy. The sun was low in the western sky and the street was deserted. Judge Dent had tipped his chair back against the wall and was asleep, snoring a little, huskily.

Suddenly, Mike hit the desk a resounding blow with his fist, kicked his chair back and jumped to his feet. He grabbed his hat and started for the door. The Judge came awake with a jump. "Wh-what's the matter?" he croaked. "Where you goin'?"

Mike Peters made no reply. He stood on the sidewalk a moment, looking quickly up and down the street. Half a block away, in front of the general store, he saw Blue Eagle and made for him with long strides.

FIVE minutes later the two had slipped down the alley and were examining the tracks of the kid's horse where they ran between the blacksmith shop and the Star Saloon. But, what neither of them saw was a dark bearded face at a side window of the Star Saloon, two close set, piggish eyes, following their every move—Jed Arn, one of Hanlon's men.

Blue Eagle crouched low in the dim light between the buildings. He was as near excited as he ever allowed himself to get. He stood up at last, pointed at the hoof prints with a long brown forefinger. "Here," he muttered. "Here, boy have heavy load in near saddle bag. Here, both tracks just same."

Mike reached for his guns. "Good boy, Blue Eagle!" he whispered. "I was right. That's all I want to know." His guns ready, he went noiselessly in through the back door of the Star Saloon and paused before Royal Hanlon's office. It was the slack time before supper. Nobody was in the saloon.

Inside the office he heard men talking, laughing. Hanlon was saying, "Well, it worked. The Kid was just a sucker. We're well rid of him, Slim. He talked too much; might get us in trouble. And before I get through with Mike Peters I'll make a sucker of him, too, before the whole county. Folks are already talking about the five thousand he stole, after killing the kid." He paused, laughed shortly. "They ain't going to elect an hombre like that. And once I'm sheriff. . . .well, you know what happens. Now, we'll split up this five thousand. My cut will replace a lot of the election money I been spending. Then, maybe I got a little shootin' match with the Sheriff. And, you know how that's done, Slim. My rifle is in my room."

Mike had heard all he wanted to hear. He kicked the door open and stepped inside. "Reach!" he snapped. Only Hanlon and Slim Devlin were in the office. They raised their hands shoulder high.

"This time, I got yuh, Royal," the Sheriff said. "I'm jailin' yuh. Bring that sack of coin. That's the evidence that'll put yuh behind bars."

"How do you figure, Mike?" Hanlon said, cooly grinning. He pushed his high 'stove pipe' hat back with one upraised hand. "We caught you trying to hide the cash, and when we came on you, you threw a gun on us." He turned to Slim. Ain't that right?" he asked.

A broad grin spread over Slim

Devlin's face. "Shore it's right, Royal," he said readily. "I'll swear to it."

The gambler shrugged. "You see, Mike? You got to be smart," he said.

"I'm taking a chance on that. Come on. Pick up that sack. I ain't. . . ."

Then suddenly Royal Hanlon moved his knee slightly, and the front panel of the desk dropped down on well oiled hinges.

Mike Peters' eyes lowered quickly to the space left by that panel. He saw the muzzles of three six-guns, pointed belt high. The middle one was aimed straight at his belt buckle. The other two slanted out slightly, to right and left.

HANLON'S grin widened. "No use, Mike," he said quickly. "If I move my other knee, all three of those guns will fire. In this country, a man sometimes keeps on living by out-smarting the other hombre. Might's well drop your guns on the floor, right now. Sure, you might get me, but I'd kill you, too. That's certain. No Mike, I'm just too smart for you."

Slim Devlin was tense, set to jump. "Let 'im have it, Royal. Drill 'im!" he grated quickly. "Yuh'll never get a better chance. Kill 'im!"

Royal Hanlon's face didn't change. His steady gaze never left the Sheriff's eyes for an instant. "Hold your horses, Slim," he said. "Wouldn't do to kill 'im in here, unless I'm forced to. The election and everything. . . . Bad effect on the voters."

Mike hesitated. Everything in his make-up screamed for him to blast the gambler, take a chance. His guns were still steady, deadly, on Hanlon and Slim Devlin.

And at that instant, outside the closed window, a flash, a crashing report, the tinkle of broken glass.

Mike Peters' brain seemed to explode in a weird burst of blinding light. He felt himself falling, his guns slipped from his hands. The floor seemed to rise up and hit him in the face. He sank into a deep pit of darkness. But just before he lost consciousness he heard, as though from far away, the heavy, thick voice of big hulking, black whiskered Jed Arn yell, "I got 'im!"

It was maybe a half hour later that Mike slowly came back from the darkness. His head ached with a terrific, throbbing agony. He felt of his scalp gingerly. His hand came away, sticky with blood where Arn's slug had plowed along his skull. Gradually he took in his surroundings. He was lying on the ground in a clump of tall grass, out in the alley, down a piece from the back of the Star Saloon, in a fence corner.

Mike took his time, got slowly to his feet, stood weaving unsteadily for a few minutes, holding to the fence until the dizziness left his brain. "Don't see how Arn missed drilling me between the eyes," he thought. "Must be, the window glass deflected the bullet a mite."

Mike Peters slowly thought the situation over. He had no doubt that Royal Hanlon and Slim Devlin believed him dead. If they had thought him still alive after he fell, Slim certainly would have finished him.

He tied his neckerchief across his forehead to keep the blood out of his eyes and started for the back door to Royal Hanlon's saloon.

Then, he stopped, leaned against the fence, doing his best to reason the whole thing out logically. What would he do, right now, if he were in Hanlon's place, considering the coming election and everything? Why, build up an alibi, clear himself of any suspicion of a part in the Sheriff's death, of course. He'd place himself where everybody could see him.

MIKE'S slow, quizzical grin spread over his face, briefly. He started to cut through to Main Street, between the Star Saloon and the blacksmith shop. His hands brushed his holsters. Empty. He changed his course for the back door to the saloon. Then he paused again, wheeled back to where he had lain on the ground.

A brief search in the grass and he stood up, his Colts in his hands. A man as smart and clever as Royal Hanlon certainly would not have

overlooked this chance to make everything look natural.

Mike sniffed the muzzles of the weapons. One of them had been fired. He quickly replaced the two empty shells in the cylinder, and was ready to step out onto Main Street. Almost at once, as he reached the sidewalk, he saw Royal Hanlon standing on the walk, down just past the hotel where he lived. Mike started down that way, ignoring the curious stares of the people he met.

He took to the middle of the street when he reached a point a few hundred feet from the gambler. Both hands shadowed his guns, his thumbs and forefingers wide spread, ready for his strike. Hanlon kept his post on the sidewalk.

"Here I am, Hanlon. This is showdown time," Mike Peters called out, and Royal Hanlon jumped nervously, stared unbelieving for a moment. He did not start immediately for the street and Mike paused, his eyes increasingly busy along the buildings on both sides of the street. He was wondering where Slim Devlin was.

Then Royal flashed a quick glance at the hotel, and, apparently satisfied, stepped down into the hock-deep dust and rushed to the middle of the street. "All right, now," he called out loudly, "But everybody can see that you started this."

Men and women, out for a stroll in the cool sage scented evening breeze from the desert, spotted this scene instantly and ran for cover.

A hundred and fifty feet still separated the two men. Mike's head was throbbing painfully, but he started forward in regular, unhurried stride. Hanlon stood unmoved, his hands poised. The street was in deep shadow, but the last level rays of the sun, shining over the peaks of the western mountains, still lit the windows on the upper floor of the three story hotel.

Now, they were only a hundred feet apart. Still, neither went for his gun. Mike came on steadily.

FIFTY feet separated them when a sharp flash of the sun's dying rays was reflected into Mike's face. He whirled, leaped back just as a rifle spat flame from the top floor of the hotel.

The crashing reports of Mike's big forty-fives shattered the dead silence of the street. Slim Devlin uttered a half strangled scream, reared up into full view and pitched to the street from the window of Royal Hanlon's third floor room in the hotel. A rifle clattered to the ground beside him.

Hanlon was firing nervously, and at that instant, Mike felt the heavy, dull shock of a slug in the biceps of his right arm. His gun went spinning from his hand. He was knocked aside a step by the force of the blow.

Royal Hanlon was firing hurriedly, desperately, and Mike heard the deadly whisper of lead, close. He whirled, his left foot advanced and fired one careful shot from his left gun. Hanlon staggered, his Colt swinging to his side. He took four or five weaving, uncertain steps toward his enemy. Then his strength left him with a rush. He fell motionless, face down in the dust of Main Street.

Mike paused only a minute, his gaze moving from Hanlon to Slim Devlin. Then he quickly reloaded his guns, turned and started for the Star Saloon. Half a block from the place, he saw three men run from the porch, leap to their saddles and race at a full run from the town. Mike turned and came back.

Standing in the street looking down at the body of Royal Hanlon, ten minutes later, old Judge Dent removed his hard hat and let a slow smile build up on his gray mustached face. He turned to Mike Peters and wheezed. "Well, I reckon there's only going to be one candidate for sheriff at the election next week, after all. And, with the evidence of Hanlon's stealing, well. . . . I reckon today's work will be a fine thing for old Cochise County, son."

Mike Peters' hand drifted to the piece of corn shuck in the breast pocket of his vest. He grinned, his thumb and finger went naturally to his craggy chin. "Yeah," he said, and turned toward Doc Wilbur's office.

GUN-LAW FOR HOMESTEADERS

Elmar's gun struck Bib on the head and knocked him down.

By CLIFF CAMPBELL

Little by little the homesteaders were coming into their own, Martin Trandall knew; but that time when they could live in peace was not yet, and a man still had to fight for his own right.

MARTIN TRANDELL hoed slowly with the deep reverence of a city man who had at long last got himself located on productive soil. Although his potatoes had been in the Montana loam only three weeks, they were already high enough for their first hoeing. And only when his younger son, twelve-year-old Bib, came running down the path from the house, did the slender homesteader look up. Bib's brown eyes were flushed with excitement.

"I was waterin' the settin' hens, Dad, and from the hen-house I saw two riders comin' across the west forty! You can't see them from here because of the hill! They're Frank Tolan and his man, Elmar!"

Martin Trandell dropped his hoe. With Bib behind him, he hurried up the path to their four-room log house. Bib was right: The riders were Frank Tolan and Elmar. Trandell thought of his double-barreled shotgun and remembered that Ernest, his older boy, had taken it sage hen hunt-

ing that noon. Maybe it was best he did not have the shotgun, their only weapon.

Bib's boyish voice was shaking. "They're comin' here lookin' for trouble, Dad!"

"Hush, Bib, hush."

"Oh, hell, Dad, if we only had the shotgun!"

Trandell repeated sharply, "Quit that talk, Bib!"

Bib watched the approaching riders with angry brown eyes.

"You watch that temper of yours," warned his father. Ernest had a fiery temper, too, and he and Ella Mae were constantly after their two sons to exercise self-control. He was glad Ella Mae had gone the day before the Jesuit Fathers' hospital in Mission Canyon. Ella Mae would be upset if she were home; bad for a woman soon to bear her third child.

Frank Tolan was a thin, short man of fifty odd years. He rode a sorrel gelding. Elmar sat a black stud, his thick body filling his saddle. Both of the cowmen carried revolvers, Trandell noticed.

"Howdy!" Tolan glanced from Martin Trandell to his son. "Where's your other boy?"

"Out hunting," replied Trandell.

Tolan ran a quick glance across Trandell's property. "A man'd figure you aimed to roost here all your life, sob-buster, judgin' from the looks of your buildin's. You've spent quite a bit of money in this place already."

"Yes, we have."

Elmar spoke shortly. "Kind of bad you have to leave...." His voice fitted his size—it was husky. Maybe he had a first name but nobody knew what it was. He was just *Elmar* and his reputation was as black as the stud he rode.

The time had arrived. They had all waited a month for this time. When they had got up that morning Ernest had said, "Well, this is the time, Dad. This is the day. And I'm sure glad Mother isn't home."

Martin Trandell had smiled. "Just a scare, son; no more. Tolan can't chase us off our land. Our homestead entry is legal. I think he is just listening to himself talk. 'This land is legally ours."

Ernest had been thoughtful. "I hope you're right, Dad," he had said. "But the month is up, today."

Tolan asked, "Are you movin', Trandell?"

"We're stayin'!" declared Bib.

Trandell said, sternly, "Bib, remember what I told you!"

Bib's boyish face was pale.

Tolan spoke to Bib. "Somebody will trim your horns someday, young fellow! You take that temper into manhood and you'll run into some fists, or a gun will cool it." He looked at Trandell. "I asked you a question."

Trandell read unleashed violence in these two. A smart man would play with them. He would promise to move and then arm himself and stay and fight them when they came back to chase him off.

"We stay," he said.

TOLAN WAS stiffly silent. Elmar stirred in leather. "I didn't think they would move, Tolan." He pushed his horse close to Bib; his gun rose, came down. Bib screamed. He moved back a step and bumped into the cabin. He grabbed for Elmar's descending arm, but the man was too strong. His Colt hit Bib across the head and knocked the boy down. Bib lay quiet.

Trandell grabbed Elmar's arm. He braced his feet and pulled the man from the horse. He got Elmar's arm under his, holding the gun straight out. If it went off it would blast into space. Three months in Montana had put strength into him—but he could not match that of Elmar.

Elmar's free hand was clubbing him in the belly. Trandell felt his strength slowly leave him. Elmar was pulling loose. Suddenly Elmar stopped hitting. Trandell felt him stiffen.

He saw Ernest then. His seventeen-year-old son had stepped out of the cabin and placed his shotgun against Elmar's spine.

"Let go of Dad or I'll kill you!"

Elmar stepped back.

Tolan held his gun. Ernest said,

"You try to pull that trigger against me and I'm shootin' Elmar in the back."

Elmar said, "For Gawd's sake, Tolan, holster your gun!"

Tolan put his gun in leather.

Bib was limp in his father's arms as Trandell carrried him into the cabin. He lay the boy on the couch and went to the door and took the shotgun from Ernest.

"You go in with Bib. Get some water and put on him."

"All right, Dad."

Elmar's long face was pale. "Ain't you goin' to put that scattergun down, Trandell?"

"Not until I know whether Bib is alive or dead. If he's dead, I'm killing you!"

Elmar stood, silent. His black stud moved off and cropped the green grass. A hen broke out cackling in the hen-house. Frank Tolan's sorrel pawed the ground. The cattleman savagely jerked his bridle-reins and made the sorrel stop.

Finally Ernest spoke. "He's all right, Dad."

Trandell's scholarly face lost its harshness. "Get on your horse, Elmar." He took Elmar's .45 and handed it to Ernest in the doorway. "Unload it, son." He looked up at Tolan. "Your pistol too, sir. No, don't reach for it. Ernest, you get it."

"This one is unloaded, Dad."

"Hand it to Elmar."

Elmar holstered his Colt quickly. The movement was liquid. Ernest took the cartridges from Tolan's weapon and handed it back.

"Now leave us alone," said Trandell.

Neither of the riders spoke. Tolan's face was white with anger. Elmar was just regaining his color. Tolan loped away with his man a pace behind him. Trandell watched them until they were on government land beyond his property line.

When he came inside Bib was sitting up and Ernest was bathing the rip in his brother's scalp.

"He sure hit me." Bib smiled boyishly.

Ernest spoke. "I was on the hill behind the house coming home when I saw them ride across the pasture. I sneaked behind the house so they couldn't see me and I crawled in through a window. I guess I got here just in time."

They were all shaken up. "You sure did," said Trandell.

Bib was serious. "Do you think they'll come back, Dad?"

"I hope not."

ERNEST HAD shot six young sage hens, had got them all in one shot, too. They had been dusting themselves on an alkali spot and had been bunched when he fired. They had not eaten sagebrush leaves yet. They had feasted on the spring berries along Beaver Creek and therefore their flesh was white and without the taste or smell of sage.

While Martin Trandell cooked supper, his sons milked the two cows and did the chores. Trandell's mind was not on his cooking. A smart man would leave Sun Prairie, would go and find another piece of good land in another locality. He would load his belongings and his family in his wagon and leave his homestead to Frank Tolan and his Circle S cattle.

The boys were feeding the hogs; he heard the pigs grunt and squeal as they pushed at the feed trough. He and Ella Mae had saved from his meager wages for almost ten years. She had patched and darned for her family and he had gone without to save money to get out of Pittsburg with its smoke and cinders. Get out and settle on a piece of land like this.

And when they had seen Sun Prairie, their search had ended. The Great Northern had built through the Milk River region a few years before. From the railhead at Malta to Sun Prairie was about forty-five miles. A man could haul his wheat into Malta with four horses on a double-boxed wheat wagon. Though he would have to thresh it with a flail until he could get hold of a threshing machine.

Here a man could raise healthy sons and keep them away from city streets. And here a man did not climb on a crowded horse-car each morning and go to a monotonous

(Continued On Page 96)

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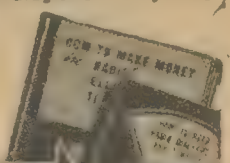

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bookkeeping office. He remembered watching the horse trot as he pulled the rickety street-car.

Somewhere there would be horses for Ernest and Bib and for himself. And somewhere there must have been land—endless land—for them to ride over. Somewhere there were high hills. Two boys could ride into these with a lunch and spend the day there. They could climb hills and roll boulders down into canyons. They could run races to see whose boulder rolled the furthest through buckbrush and over ledges. Then they could race their ponies home through the dusk and do their evening chores.

The boys came in, faces flushed from their race up the path. "You better be careful, Bib," warned Martin Trandell.

"Ah, I'm all right, Dad."

Ernest spoke. "I should have killed him for hitting Bib."

Martin Trandell glanced hurriedly at his first-born. "Ernest, you shouldn't have said that."

"They'll come again," warned Ernest. "This isn't settled yet, Dad, we're still on our homestead. What will we do?"

"I'll talk it over with Father O'Flaherty at the Mission."

Ernest considered that. "That might do some good, at that, though I doubt it. That sage hen sure smells good."

"Look who cooked it!" said Martin Trandell.

They ate slower than usual. Usually the boys ate in a hurry so they could get outside again. They had almost finished the meal when Bib, who was sitting where he could look out the door, said suddenly: "There's a man on horseback comin' through our gate!"

Ernest ran to the door, mouth filled with food. He stared and then started to chew. "Looks like the old man from the Mission," he said. "You don't suppose Mother—oh, boy, I hope it's a girl!"

"Give me a boy any day." The freckles across Bib's nose wrinkled.

"He's ridin' too slow." Ernest scowled. "If'n— Well, he'd be

(Continued On Page 98)

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(Continued From Page 96)

ridin' fast then, wouldn't he, Dad?"

"He sure would, son."

The old man sniffed. "Cookin' young sage hen, huh? Father O'Flaherty sent me out 'cause Sister Superior wants you in the Mission on 'count of your missus. No, the baby ain't born yet but— That sage hen sure smells good."

"Come in and eat." Trandell spoke to his sons. "You boys go saddle our horses."

Ernest asked, "All three of us goin' into town?" Trandell nodded. "But somebody should stay and watch the farm, Dad. Tolan and Elmar might ride back."

The old man stopped eating. "Them two been plaguin' you?"

Trandell nodded. "Don't tell Mrs. Trandell."

HALF an hour later they rode west toward the Mission. Dusk was settling over the Little Rockies and Trandell watched the shadows grow. But his thoughts always returned to Frank Tolan and Elmar. Ernest was right; this was not finished. He glanced back at their farm.

They gained the rim of the canyon. The lamps in the Mission and the small town surrounding it glowed down there like bits of stars on a black background. With the old man in the lead, they rode down the steep trail into the canyon.

They dismounted in front of the barn. "Father O'Flaherty said to leave your horses here," informed the old man. They turned their reins over to a Gros Ventres Indian who led them into the Mission stables. "You have quarters here for the night. the Father said." The old man moved off toward his cabin. Father O'Flaherty awaited them under the arch in the pine-log Mission.

"You are to stay with us tonight," he said. "No, the baby has not been born yet. We have a cabin for the boys." He called out in a low voice and a squaw came from a door. "Take the boys." He called out in a low voice and a squaw came from a door. "Take the boys to their cabin, White Antelope."

(Continued On Page 100)

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(Continued From Page 98)

"We want to see Mom," said Bib.

Ernest said, "Come on and shut up!"

Father O'Flaherty smiled. He was a short, stocky man of Trandell's age, about forty. He had great compassion for his fellows and their errors.

"You are too quiet, Martin."

Trandell told him about Frank Tolan and Elmar. The Holy Man was gravely thoughtful. "So they *did* come to make good their threat? What can we do to make Tolan change his mind?"

"I've talked with the sheriff in Malta. He says he cannot arrest Tolan until he has committed a crime."

"They broke the law today."

Shadows danced across the cobblestone. "Maybe I could get them arrested, but if they were convicted they would only pay a fine. And that, Father, would really make things worse, don't you think?"

"Yes, I guess it would."

They went into a long, high room. They sat at a rude table. A heavy squaw brought red chokecherry wine. This warmed Martin Trandell's blood a little.

Father O'Flaherty spoke. "They will eventually have to let settlers on Sun Prairie. Farmers are settling rapidly on Milk River around Malta. In a year or two they will reach Sun Prairie. If you can hold out until then—"

"I don't know what to do. My sons—I'm afraid for them. Ernest has such a temper, and he's getting to be a man. Maybe I should take my family and leave."

"That would be best, I guess. I've spoken to Tolan, but he won't listen to me. But yet, a man should not run."

Martin Trandell thought of the high hills and the rolling benchlands. Sun Prairie had been *the* place, Ella Mae had said, her eyes dancing.

"No, I have to stay."

"I shall talk with Tolan again."

Trandell's long fingers turned his glass. "I doubt if it will do you a bit of good, Father. Men like him make wars and cause suffering."

(Continued On Page 102)

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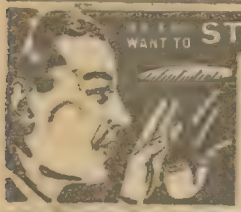

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(Continued From Page 100)

"The Lord will show us the way. But come, Martin, your wife has been asking for you. Remember not to mention this trouble to her."

"Not for the world, Father."

A CANDLE burned on a mantle piece. Sister Superior sat on the other side of the bed. Ella Mae had her eyes closed. Trandell nodded to the Sister and bent and kissed his wife on the lips. Her eyes opened and the candle-light glistened in them.

"Where are the boys?"

"They are in a cabin here. We thought that if they came they would disturb you too much. How do you feel?"

"All right. Did Tolan and Elmar come?"

"No."

She studied his face. "I'm so glad to hear that, Martin. They're going to let us stay. I've been lying here and praying and hoping they would."

"Hush."

She smiled. "Bet you it's a girl!"

He kissed her again and went into the room with Father O'Flaherty. "We'll wait here," said the priest. Martin Trandell reminded him that he should get some sleep. The Father smiled and said he would have plenty of time to sleep tomorrow. They were opposites—Trandell, serious, quiet; Father O'Flaherty, happy, boisterous. Maybe this difference in character was what made them such firm friends.

The baby was born about four in the morning, was a girl. Martin Trandell looked from his new daughter to his wife. "We'll have you both on horseback soon."

"Go tell the boys, Martin."

But he stood and looked at his new daughter. All his adult years he had marvelled at the eternal mystery of life. Finally he went to the boys' cabin. He entered without knocking. It was dark inside.

He saw the bed and went to it. The first pillow was not used and he shook Bib violently, bringing him wide awake.

"Bib, where's Ernest?"

Bib rubbed his eyes. "Ernest, ain't

(Continued On Page 104)

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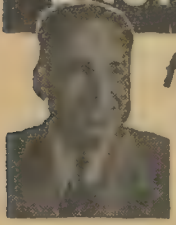

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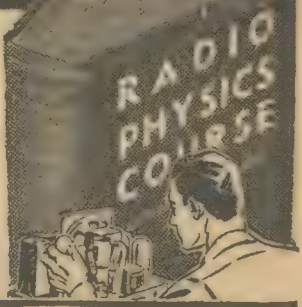

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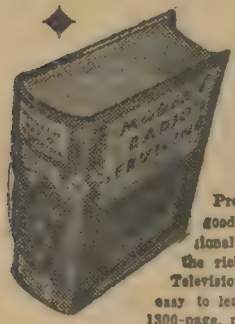

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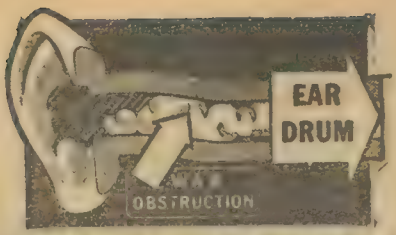

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(Continued From Page 102)

he—? Why, he went to bed with me—"

Martin Trandell suddenly understood. "Oh, that's right. He got up and came to me, saying you were kicking too much in your sleep and Father O'Flaherty put him in another cabin. Mother wants you to come and see your sister."

"Oh, gosh—a girl, a sister!"

The youth struggled into his clothes while Martin Trandell went outside into the star-splattered night. Father O'Flaherty stood beside the archway.

"Ernest is gone, Father. He left while Bib slept."

"You think—"

"He's gone to the farm, of course. He said that somebody should have stayed to guard it."

They went to the barn. "He left about midnight," said the Indian. Martin Trandell saddled his horse quickly. "Do you have a gun around, Father?"

"Martin, please—"

"There might have been trouble. I'll need a gun for protection, if nothing else. You have one, haven't you?"

Father O'Flaherty said, "There's a .45 hanging on the saddle peg there. A cowboy left it here."

Martin Trandell rode over and took the belt and gun. He buckled the belt around his hips and opened the breach of the .45. It was loaded and he put it in the holster, the strange weight of it heavy against his thigh.

"Tell Ella Mae you sent me home," said Trandell. "Don't let her worry, Father, and make Bib stay with you."

He glanced up at the eastern canyon wall and then rode toward it.

HE FOUND the wagon road that ran up out of the canyon and he put his horse against the steepness. He should have watched Ernest and kept him at the Mission; he should have asked Father O'Flaherty to send a Mission hand back to watch their homestead. But perhaps he was letting his imagination run. His horse was breathing heavily when he reached the top and the dark stretches of Sun Prairie ran to the

(Continued On Page 106)

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(Continued From Page 104)

east, broken by the distant flames of a burning building.

One of our buildings, he thought.

He ran his tired horse to a stiff lope, quirting him. Three months on the range had taught him to sit a saddle well. And as he loped across the level land, gradually the flames ahead receded and lost their height. He was stirred by a mixture of anger and fear: anger because of the burning building and fear for Ernest. But still, he used caution.

He left his horse behind a hill and ran through the scrub-pine and buckbrush, carrying his pistol. Then he squatted in the brush and looked at the homestead. The burning building was the barn. It had burned down to hot embers that glowed in the darkness. The house was intact, windows without lamplight. The hen house was all right, so was the root cellar.

He circled, holding his weapon. Maybe the marauders were hidden in the brush. Maybe he could locate their horses. He found one horse—Ernest's horse. There were no others.

He called then, "Ernest, where are you? This is Dad." The words ran across the hill and then his answer came.

"I'm over here, Dad, by the cottonwood."

"Are you all right?"

A pause and then, "Yeah, I'm all right, Dad." Martin Trandell started forward. "They were Elmar and Tolan," the boy called. "They've left." Trandell hurried toward the big cottonwood tree. He could see his son now: Ernest sat with his back against the tree and his shotgun was across his thighs.

"You're wounded, Ernest. There's blood on your shoulder."

Ernest had taken off his shirt. "It isn't bad, though," he said. "How did you know I was here?"

Trandell told him about his new sister. "Mama wanted a girl, too," said the boy. "Gee, that's swell, Dad. I had on one of my new shirts and when the bullet hit me it tore a hole in its sleeve. I took it off real quick so it didn't get very bloody."

Martin Trandell felt a catch in his throat. Ella Mae had made the boys

new shirts from cloth he had bought in Malta. "How long ago did this happen?"

"Oh, I don't know: maybe a half hour, maybe. I'm not bad hurt, Dad. Look, I can bend my fingers and my elbow. That feels like a cut, that's all. It feels just like the time Sonny Boy fell and we hit the barbwire fence and I cut my leg."

"Who burned the barn?"

"Frank Tolan and Elmar. I kept thinking about the farm so I snook out of bed and came home. I got our shotgun and I hid and then they come—they got the barn on fire before I saw them. I shot one barrel but they were a long ways off and I heard one of them holler. Sounded like Elmar. They started firing at me and I gave them the other barrel but they were too far away. They ran and got their horses before I could load again."

"Did you see them clearly?"

"Yeah, I did."

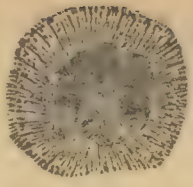
They walked to the burned-down barn. The building was a loss and their two sets of work-harnesses had been burned. But the cows had been in the night-pasture and the two teams of horses had been out on pasture, too.

"We sure were lucky that cows and horses were out," declared Ernest. "Dad, if this keeps on we'll either have to kill them or they will kill us. Things aren't like they were in Pittsburg, Dad. If something went wrong there you could call the cops, but there ain't no cops here."

MARTIN TRANDELL'S face was taut. He could go to Malta and file a complaint against Frank Tolan and Elmar and take them in for trial, but he knew he would never convict the two men. Had there been a witness with Ernest he might have had a chance to put them in the penitentiary. But Ernest had been alone and the two cowmen would say they were at home when the barn was burned and they would get lying witnesses to back up their fabrications.

And Ernest was right. This was Montana, not Pittsburg. Men here

(Continued On Page 108)



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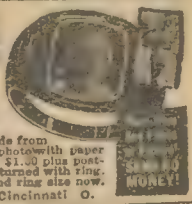

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(Continued From Page 107)

did not bend their characters to fit the requirements of statute law. They had taken this ground from the Indians, from nature and the elements, and they had established their domain by strength and by death. Now the moving hand of Time was slowly taking from them peacefully what they had risked their lives and their breaths to gather. Farmers were settling on Milk river and in Malta their buggies lined the hitch-racks on Saturdays. They would come to Sun Prairie, too, and Frank Tolan and his cowpunchers could never stop their advance.

The postponement of this influx concerned him and his family.

"Get on your pony and ride to the Mission, Ernest. See Father O'Flaherty right away. Get him to give you medical attention and tell him exactly what happened. But don't tell your mother or Bib a thing; your mother would worry and we can't let her do that."

"What are you going to do?"

"I'll stay here on guard. It's already getting light. Send Bib out to me about ten o'clock to tell me how Mother is."

"You sure you'll be all right? What if they come back?"

"I don't think they'll come back—not in daylight, anyway."

"I think I put some beebees in Elmar," said Ernest. "I heard somebody holler—I think it was him."

He helped Ernest on his pony and the boy loped away. Trandell watched him until the rising hills hid him. Three months ago he could hardly set a saddle and now he rode like a cowpuncher. When the boy was out of sight Trandell walked to his horse and got up on him. He held the shotgun in front of him. He had given Ernest the Colt given to him by Father O'Flaherty.

The happenings in the last hour had left him with a deep weariness that went into his bones. Their trouble with the Circle S had always made him worry for the safety of his family. Now Ernest had been shot and that fear had turned into a strong anger.

(Continued On Page 110)

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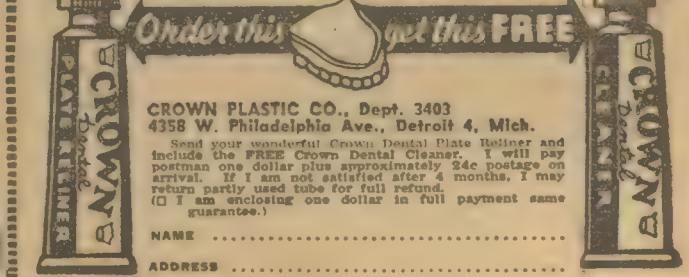

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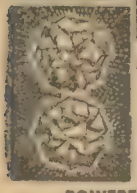

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(Continued From Page 108)

THE Circle S had its headquarters on Upper Beaver Creek. The log house was long and lay on the base of a hill that was marked by clumps of sagebrush. On the flat below it were the corrals and bunkhouse and barn. Trandell tied his horse in the cottonwoods along Beaver Creek and went toward the house carrying his shotgun.

Circle S hands were on calf-roundup and were holding a herd forty miles away, on Bear Mesa. Smoke lifted lazily from the house. It came also from a cabin behind the barn.

Hidden by wild rosebushes, he came within a few feet of the back door. There were no dogs or they would have been barking by now. He ran across the clearing. The door was unlocked. He opened it, stepped into a hall.

He walked slowly down the dark hall and came to a big room. First he saw the rock fireplace and the fire there—then he saw the desk with Frank Tolan behind it. Tolan had taken off his gunbelt. This and his gun lay on the desk before him.

Elmar's right arm was in a sling. He saw Trandell from where he sat and he said suddenly, "We've got a visitor, Frank."

Tolan drew his hand back six have!" and he leaned forward to reach for his gun.

Trandell said, "Leave that gun be, or I'll kill you!"

Tolan drew his hand back six inches.

Elmar spoke. "Kind of early for a visit, ain't it?"

"You visited my farm earlier this morning. You shot my oldest boy." He looked at Elmar's sling. "I suppose Ernest's beebees did that to you?" He saw that Elmar did not wear his gun.

"I thought I saw a fire over that way," said Tolan slyly.

"You started it."

"You say we did; I say we didn't. I spent the night at home. Elmar and old Bill, my barn-man, can back me up. Elmar was wounded while hunting grouse yesterday. You haven't a point for the law, Trandell."

"I'm not appealing to the law."

Trandell cocked one barrel. The click was loud. Tolan reached for his gun suddenly. Trandell raised his shotgun. He had read about men who could draw and shoot a pistol fast. He had heard Tolan was one of these men. Now he saw that these stories were true.

For when he shot Tolan, Tolan already had his pistol. Trandell's shotgun pellets, bunched at such close range, tore into Tolan's right shoulder. The cowman hollered and dropped his Colt. He went back in his chair and groaned and held his shoulder with his left hand.

Trandell turned his shotgun on Elmar. Elmar was still in his chair. "Don't shoot!" he screamed. "I ain't got no gun!"

Trandell spoke huskily. "See what you can do for your boss."

Tolan groaned, "For Gawd's sake, get out of here with that shotgun!"

"You leaving me and my family alone?"

"I'll—"

Trandell lifted the gun. "Promise, or I'll kill you, Tolan!"

Tolan's face was white. "Get out. . . I'll leave you alone. Elmar, call old Bill, quick!"

TOLAN slumped face-down on his desk. Old Bill, a grizzled old man, had heard the shooting, and he ran in. He stopped and looked at Trandell and his shotgun. "Damn me if I don't think you did right, Trandell. They pushed you long enough—"

Elmar snapped, "Help me with Tolan."

The old man straightened Tolan in his chair. The cowman's head hung forward, mouth open. Old Bill slid his hand inside Tolan's shirt and held his palm over the man's heart. He waited patiently.

"Tolan's dead," he said.

Trandell was a little shaken. He had not meant to kill the cowman. The shock of the heavy pellets and the loss of blood had killed the cowman. Trandell thought suddenly: *I guess it was best he got killed, other-*

(Continued On Page 112)

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(Continued From Page 111)

wise one of us would have died after he got well. . . .

"He reached for his gun," said Trandell.

Elmar said, savagely, "I don't give a damn whether he pulled first or not. With him dead, this outfit is done. You can count me out, Trandell. I'm gatherin' my warbag and driftin'."

Trandell backed outside, backed down the hall. He ran through the buckbrush. He rode fast and came out on a ridge a mile away. There was no pursuit. He met Father O'Flaherty on the Mission road. The Holy Man was driving a team of snappy sorrels on a buggy. He saw him and turned the sorrels, pointing them back toward the Mission. He waited.

"What happened, Martin?"

Trandell stirred in saddle. "I killed Frank Tolan." He told what had happened. "Did Ernest reach the Mission?"

"Yes, he's in bed there. I was afraid you would do this. Tie your horse behind the buggy and ride with me." The priest held the reins in strong hands. "We will go into Malta and you must give yourself up. Did you give Tolan a chance?"

Martin Trandell buried his head in his hands. "He reached for his gun—I didn't want to kill him. Was there any other way out for me, Father?"

The heavy priest was silent. Finally he murmured, "None other, my son. I don't sanction violence. I have pledged my life work to fight against lust and hate and greed. But you had no other choice. This whole country has been watching and knows what Tolan has done to you. I have much influence in Malta. Your family needs you—your sons will ride with you across the prairie—" He fell back into silence.

And Martin Trandell, too, was silent. There had been no other way. This Land, and the Times, had so ordained this strife. This Land was strong and in its strength lay its goodness. This night he had seen a life come into being and had seen another depart. The distance between birth and death was long.

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